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The Representation of Prohibition in
Fully-Serialised American Prestige
Television

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Film and
Television Studies

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Contents

<u>Illustrations</u>	p. 3
<u>Acknowledgements</u>	p. 8
<u>Declaration</u>	p. 9
<u>Abstract</u>	p. 10
<u>Introduction</u>	p. 11
<u>Chapter 1: Literature Review</u>	p. 28
<u>Chapter 2: <i>The Wire</i></u>	p. 90
<u>Chapter 3: <i>Boardwalk Empire</i></u>	p. 147
<u>Chapter 4: <i>Breaking Bad</i></u>	p. 205
<u>Conclusion</u>	p. 271
<u>Bibliography</u>	p. 294
<u>Teleography: Case Studies</u>	p. 340
<u>Teleography</u>	p. 348
<u>Filmography</u>	p. 351

Illustrations

1. The atmospheric lighting preceding Omar's meeting with Brother Mouzone. **p. 105**
2. The low-angled, Mexican-standoff composition. **p. 105**
3. Mayor Royce talks about reform, but the font size on his poster tells the real story. **p. 105**
4. The calculatedly muted shooting of Dozerman. **p. 113**
5. The crucifix above Colvin expresses his decency and righteousness. **p. 113**
6. Colvin and another crucifix. **p. 113**
7. Colvin meets with the Deacon again. **p. 119**
8. Boxing gloves replace crucifixes in the mise-en-scene. **p. 119**
9. The usual composition of Stringer when he meets Avon in prison. **p. 119**
10. The reverse shot of Stringer and Avon. **p. 129**
11. Close-up on Avon, with Stringer still in frame. **p. 129**
12. Close-up on Avon, with Stringer excluded. **p. 129**
13. Close-up on Stringer, with Avon excluded. **p. 130**
14. Close-up on Avon, following D'Angelo's death. **p. 130**
15. Close-up on Stringer, the architect of D'Angelo's death. **p. 130**
16. Stringer extends his fist to Avon. **p. 131**
17. Avon reciprocates the gesture. **p. 131**
18. Stringer makes eye contact with Avon. **p. 131**
19. Stringer's disembodied fist reaches out to Avon. **p. 132**
20. Avon avoids making eye-contact with Stringer. **p. 132**

21. Avon reciprocates grudgingly and in disembodied close-up.	p. 132
22. Marlo is unhappy that his name has been disrespected.	p. 152
23. Marlo is really unhappy that his name has been disrespected.	p. 152
24. The sumptuous, colour-coordinated beauty of <i>Boardwalk Empire</i> .	p. 152
25. The colour composition of <i>Boardwalk Empire</i> .	p. 153
26. The soft naturalistic lighting of Atlantic City.	p. 153
27. The use of windows and seaside lighting.	p. 153
28. Monochromatic night scene.	p. 154
29. Monochromatic night scene with gunfire.	p. 154
30. Low-angle composition with visible ceiling.	p. 154
31. Low-angle group composition with visible ceiling.	p. 155
32. Low-angle two-shot composition with visible ceiling.	p. 155
33. Deep focus cinematography in Atlantic City.	p. 155
34. Deep focus cinematography in Ireland.	p. 156
35. The aftermath of the failed assassination of Gyp Rosetti.	p. 156
36. The aftermath of Travis Bickle's rescue mission in <i>Taxi Driver</i> .	p. 156
37. CGI composition of New York.	p. 168
38. Baby carriage full of alcohol on the eve of Prohibition.	p. 168
39. The shot from <i>The Public Enemy</i> that Scorsese borrows.	p. 168
40. The illegal distillery in <i>Boardwalk Empire</i> .	p. 169
41. The illegal distillery in <i>The Roaring Twenties</i> .	p. 169
42. The spectral, tempting Nucky merges with his dark surroundings.	p. 169
43. Margaret sees the true face of the monster she married.	p. 212
44. Cleaning up human remains from Jesse's floorboards.	p. 212
45. Walt's chemical composition flashback.	p. 212
46. The uncanny contrast between the figure of Walt and his	p. 220

surroundings.	
47. The first Heisenberg reflection appears at the moment of diagnosis.	p. 220
48. Walt helps his disabled son, while his doppelganger appears in the mirror.	p. 220
49. The family considers Walt Jr's jeans while Heisenberg spots his first victims.	p. 221
50. Walt's doppelganger can be seen in the windshield of KENWINS' car.	p. 221
51. Walt in the Heisenberg hat.	p. 221
52. Heisenberg in the Heisenberg hat.	p. 222
53. Walt attempts to discard his alter-ego.	p. 222
54. Walt's assault on Skyler.	p. 222
55. Walt is in the frame while his face is reflected in the towel dispenser.	p. 229
56. Walt destroys his own reflection.	p. 229
57. Walt considers his previous work.	p. 229
58. At no point do Walt and his reflection appear at the same time – no more alter-ego.	p. 230
59. Los Pollos Hermanos reflection on Walt's car window.	p. 230
60. Walt's reflection appears in the restaurant window.	p. 230
61. Walt's reflection in the gumball machine.	p. 231
62. Walt's reflection registers Gus' reflection.	p. 231
63. Gus' reflection acknowledges Walt's – the doppelgangers meet.	p. 231
64. The Salamance brothers crawl to the shrine.	p. 236
65. The portrait of Heisenberg in the shrine.	p. 236
66. The brothers decide they need a change of clothes for their trip to	p. 236

America.	
67. The Salamancas' skull-toed boots draw attention.	p. 237
68. The explosive consequences of that attention.	p. 237
69. A cartel informant's head on the back of a tortoise packed with explosives.	p. 237
70. The Salamanca brothers on the threshold of the White home.	p. 240
71. Walt sings in the shower, unaware of his vulnerability.	p. 240
72. The camera follows the axe through the house.	p. 240
73. The brothers notice something on the White fridge...	p. 241
74. ...which turns out to be an ultrasound picture of the unborn baby, Holly.	p. 241
75. The brothers wait patiently for Walt to finish his shower.	p. 241
76. The text from Gus makes them abandon their mission.	p. 242
77. The long hallway makes the unsuspecting Walt seem more vulnerable and alone.	p. 242
78. Gus picks up the box cutter. Walt is concerned.	p. 242
79. The camera focuses on the blade. Walt remains concerned.	p. 243
80. Gus stands over Walt with the box cutter. Walt is very concerned.	p. 243
81. Gus unexpectedly cuts Victor's throat.	p. 243
82. Gus stares down Walt and Jesse while Victor bleeds out.	p. 252
83. Bird's eye view shot of Walt, unable to perceive where Gus is observing him from.	p. 252
84. The cartel sniper begins his assault on Gus' henchmen.	p. 252
85. Jesse's reaction to the gunfire (or lack of it).	p. 253
86. The dead henchman from Jesse's point of view.	p. 253
87. The cartel sniper from Jesse's point of view.	p. 253

- 88.** Gus walks into oncoming sniper fire. **p. 254**
- 89.** Bullets hit the ground in front of Gus. He keeps walking. **p. 254**
- 90.** Gus challenges the cartel sniper to kill him. **p. 254**
- 91.** The cartel sniper's point of view through the telescopic sight. **p. 258**
- 92.** Walt's point of view as Gus looks out at the rooftops, trying to find him. **p. 258**
- 93.** Tio Salamanca's suicide bomb goes off. **p. 258**
- 94.** Gus steps out from the blast zone, apparently unharmed. **p. 259**
- 95.** The nurses' reactions suggest Gus might not be unharmed. **p. 259**
- 96.** Gus is definitely not unharmed. **p. 259**

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the following thesis is solely my own work, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a degree, either in the same or different form, to this or any other University.

Abstract

This thesis brings together three recent examples of fully-serialised American prestige television drama for sustained close textual analysis, focused on the way that the subject of prohibition is represented in each series. *The Wire*, *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad* all involve prolonged engagement with prohibited markets as a major component of their storylines, but the importance of this subject has been under-appreciated or ignored within television criticism. This research explores how each series characterises the topic of prohibition, with particular emphasis on the way that each case study's narrative organisation and aesthetic construction influence aspects of representation.

The focus of this thesis stays predominantly on the representation of prohibition, but the approach taken in each chapter differs according to the specific aesthetic and narrative features of each series. What remains consistent throughout each chapter is the emphasis on the narrative momentum present in each series, understood within this research as a shifting scale between centrifugal and centripetal narrative complexity. In addition to examining the influence of these different approaches to narrative organisation, this research also emphasises the importance of integrating critical approaches that address questions of television style and interpretation. This approach blends more traditional television studies concerns regarding formal and representational matters with approaches to criticism and aesthetic analysis more typically found in film studies, and demonstrates the value of bringing these practices more closely together in future study.

Introduction

This thesis seeks to contribute to contemporary debates within television scholarship through providing detailed critical analysis of three successful US prestige television series – *The Wire* (HBO, 2002-2008), *Boardwalk Empire* (HBO, 2010-2014) and *Breaking Bad* (AMC, 2008-2013). The aim of the thesis is to explore the different modes of narrative, stylistic and representational complexity of these programmes, and thus elucidate key textual strategies in each. The case studies are united through an engagement with the thematic terrain of illegal trade in forbidden commodities (drugs and alcohol), but my analysis seeks to go beyond a simple analysis of the representation of prohibition to consider how these texts are organised narratively, and to assess the extent to which the formal properties of each series influence how the topic of prohibition is represented. Within this thesis three related questions will be addressed, namely how the aesthetic construction of each case study impacts their representation of prohibition, how the narrative organisation of each series influences the representation of prohibition, and how useful Jason Mittell's articulation of centrifugal and centripetal narrative complexity is for understanding representational issues within fully-serialised immense television dramas.

The past fifteen years have seen many significant changes occur within the television industry in the United States and around the world, spurred on by technological developments that have impacted everything from production practices, to distribution networks, to the perception of television's status as a popular art form. One consequence of these changes has been the emergence of a particular narrative form of television fiction, typically categorised as 'narrative

complexity’¹ wherein elements of both serial narration and episodic narration are hybridised to form a distinct narrative mode. This type of television is not a recent development, as various series have utilised this hybrid approach since at least the 1970s². However, it is only in the past couple of decades that this form has become widespread, and that a body of scholarship has arisen to define, analyse and critique what makes narrative complexity distinctive and attractive to contemporary television audiences.

A less ubiquitous but arguably just as important development has been the emergence of fully-serialised television series, often grouped together as examples of ‘quality’ or ‘prestige’ television, which tell a continuous story across multiple seasons, often producing immense televisual texts that require scores of hours to watch in their entirety. However, these fully-serialised series have received comparatively less attention than hybridised shows, at least partly because until very recently these types of series were far less prevalent. In the past few years the emergence of online streaming libraries like Netflix and Amazon Prime have begun producing their own content, a significant proportion of which are fully-serialised long-form dramas³. Unlike conventional television networks, online subscription services typically do not release their original series in weekly episodes, but instead make an entire season of a series available for viewing at once. This distribution strategy is often understood as a way of encouraging or at least abetting the viewing practice known as ‘binge-watching’, wherein a television viewer consumes multiple episodes of a particular series in a single sitting⁴. This phenomenon has already been identified in relation to the viewing of television series on DVD, but it has been

¹ Jason Mittell, ‘Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television’, *The Velvet Light Trap* 58 (Fall 2006), pp. 29-40.

² See Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition: Forms, Values and Cultural Change* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997).

³ See, for example, *House of Cards* (Netflix, 2013-), *Bloodline* (Netflix, 2015-), *Marvel’s Daredevil* (Netflix, 2015-), *Sense8* (Netflix, 2015-), *The Man in the High Castle* (Amazon Prime, 2015-), *Narcos* (Netflix, 2015-).

⁴ For further discussion of this phenomenon see, Charlotte Brunsdon, ‘Bingeing on Box-Sets: The National and the Digital in Television Crime Drama’ in Jostein Gripsrud (ed.), *Relocating Television: Television in the Digital Context* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010); Mareike Jenner, ‘Binge-Watching: Video-on-Demand, Quality TV and Mainstreaming Fandom’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18 September 2015; Mareike Jenner, ‘Is This TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and Binge-Watching’, *New Media & Society*, 18:2 (2016), pp. 257-273.

exacerbated in recent years as content creators seek to encourage such viewing by changing the narrative construction of the programmes they produce⁵.

As more and more streaming services join the marketplace, each attempting to draw critical attention and viewer loyalty, the growth of fully-serialised television series seems likely to continue. Just as changes in technology and distribution necessitated the development of concepts like ‘narrative complexity’, this thesis argues that a similar project is required in relation to fully-serialised immense television series. In particular this research draws upon the work on fully-serialised television drama already undertaken by Jason Mittell, who has identified what he terms “two distinct modes of narrative complexity”⁶, which “approach serialisation with distinctly different vectors”⁷. According to Mittell, centrifugal complexity is where the “ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld. On a centrifugal program, there is no clear narrative centre, as the action traces what happens between characters and institutions as they spread outward”⁸. Conversely, centripetal complexity is where the “narrative movement pulls actions and characters inward toward a gravitational centre, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action”⁹. This thesis will appropriate Mittell’s definitions of centrifugal and centripetal complexity and consider their ability to provide insights into areas of television studies inquiry beyond those Mittell established in his account.

Mittell’s conception of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum for fully-serialised television grew out of his work on television aesthetics and in particular his desire to begin to articulate some principles for carrying out evaluative analysis of specific television series. The role of evaluation within television studies remains a contentious subject and one that this research does

⁵ Amanda Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

⁶ Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2015), p. 222.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p.223.

not intend to engage with significantly. Instead the focus of this thesis will be on assessing the usefulness of Mittell's categories in relation to more conventional television studies concerns, namely the analysis of representation. This is a subject that Mittell consciously avoids in the framing of his work, writing that his poetics-based approach "is different from more common questions of interpretation, which seek to answer 'what does this mean?' or of cultural power, asking 'how does this impact society?'"¹⁰. Mittell doesn't deny that his approach has the potential to address such issues, but he acknowledges that "the focus of my analysis is understanding the way television tells stories, not the cultural impact or interpretation of those stories"¹¹. The goal of this research is to integrate Mittell's understanding of centripetal and centrifugal complexity with a focus on questions of representation that involve a methodology drawing partly from Mittell's approach, partly from Murray Smith's work on the 'structure of sympathy'¹², and also on issues of style mostly overlooked by Mittell. Specifically, this research adopts an approach similar to that identified by a number of scholars as 'expressive criticism', and which is currently exemplified by those television scholars whose research interests are located within the field of television aesthetics.

Selection of Case Studies

Before engaging with further discussion of the methodological approach taken in this research, it is necessary to address the three case studies that will be subjected to sustained critical analysis in each of their respective chapters. The three series that will serve as case studies are *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk Empire*, and it is important to establish why these three series were selected. Mittell's development of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum came directly from his analysis of *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*, which might invite the question of why I have

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 5

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

chosen to keep these as case studies rather than selecting new examples. The first reason is that the decision to address the usefulness of the centrifugal/centripetal schema in relation to issues of representation already provides a point of difference between this research and Mittell's work. Mittell's approach is informed by his approach to television poetics but also by his desire to engage in evaluative criticism that addresses individual texts on their own terms as far as possible. As will be discussed further in the literature review, Mittell's approach is very insightful and compelling when it comes to those matters which have typically been the purview of scholars working in the poetic tradition, particularly regarding questions of narrative and character. The purpose of this research is to explore whether the centrifugal/centripetal designation has greater application beyond the evaluative purposes that it served for Mittell. Using both *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* facilitates the possibility of comparing and contrasting the conclusions that this research draws about the relationship between centrifugal and centripetal complexity and representation with the conclusions that Mittell draws regarding narrative and character. Mittell finds the distinction between centrifugal and centripetal complexity to be a meaningful one in relation to evaluation. This research seeks to answer whether it has wider applications when considering issues of representation.

Although analysing the same texts that Mittell used to form his categories allows for direct comparisons to be made, it also risks the possibility of producing analysis that is too wedded to the understanding of centrifugal/centripetal complexity that Mittell offers. To avoid falling into this error, it was necessary to include another series that would offer a distinct point of comparison with both *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. In order to achieve this it was necessary to consider the range of fully-serialised shows available and attempt to identify one that represented as closely as possible a hybrid that incorporated both centrifugal and centripetal narration. Mittell defines narrative complexity as "a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration—not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but

a shifting balance”¹³. This research approaches fully-serialised narrative complexity from the same perspective, arguing that *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* represent the two most pronounced examples of centrifugal and centripetal narration respectively, and that any other fully-serialised programmes will fit somewhere between the two poles.

Thus the goal in selecting a third case study was to identify a series that could be characterised as occupying the middle ground between the heavily centrifugal *The Wire* and the heavily centripetal *Breaking Bad*. The series that were considered as possible case studies were *Mad Men* (AMC, 2007-2015), *Dexter* (Showtime, 2006-2013), *Treme* (HBO, 2010-2013), *Deadwood* (HBO, 2004-2006), *Big Love* (HBO, 2006-2011) and *Boardwalk Empire*. In the case of *Mad Men*, *Dexter* and *Big Love* the narrative organisation was heavily weighted to the centripetal side, as in each series the focus is on a small group of characters whose psychological and interpersonal issues remain the central focus across multiple seasons. While particular seasons or storylines often provided the opportunity for the storyworld of each series to expand beyond the core group of characters, the overwhelming narrative force continued to be centripetal, making them less than ideal candidates for inclusion. *Treme* and *Deadwood* faced the opposite problem, in that they both leaned heavily towards the centrifugal end of the spectrum, somewhat unsurprising in the case of *Treme* considering that much of its creative team had previously worked on *The Wire*. While each show had characters that were more prominently featured than others, the narratives of each series continued to spread outwards with each season, introducing new locales and fresh sets of characters whose relationship to the plot was not contingent on their relationships to the central characters.

The only series that really struck a balance between the two approaches was *Boardwalk Empire*, which stayed resolutely focused on the central character of Nucky Thompson (Steve Buscemi) across multiple seasons, offering access to his past life via the use of flashbacks, and also provided access to his subconscious through the depiction of his dreams. However, this intense

¹³ Mittell, ‘Narrative Complexity’ p. 32.

focus on one central character was offset by the epic scope that the series offered of the Prohibition era, featuring dozens of characters (often based on real historical figures) centrifugally spread across a number of different cities (Atlantic City, New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, Miami), many of them operating independently of any storyline connected to Nucky. *Boardwalk Empire* offered an ideal balance between the centripetal storyline attached to Nucky and the centrifugal one concerned with providing an expansive perspective of the historical period and the forces at work within it.

Along with the contrast provided by *Boardwalk Empire*'s narrative organisation, the other aspect of the show that recommended it as a case study was the fact it was set during the Prohibition era, and dealt centrally with the workings of the illegal alcohol market. This context was particularly relevant in relation to Mittell's characterisation of the similarities between *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* in his elucidation of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum. As Mittell writes when comparing the two shows, "both series have a somewhat similar focus on drug dealers, crime syndicates, and ongoing battles among police and competing criminal groups"¹⁴. The similarities between the two series pointed towards the representation of drugs as a possible point of comparison between the series, but the inclusion of *Boardwalk Empire* made this impractical (only in later seasons did drugs become part of the series). What became apparent was that while the substances differed from series to series (cocaine and heroin in *The Wire*, crystal methamphetamine in *Breaking Bad*, and alcohol in *Boardwalk Empire*), what linked all three was the fact that, within the storyworlds being portrayed, they were all illegal. In each series, the central characters are to a large extent defined by their relationship to the topic of prohibition, either because they are participants in the illegal trade in particular substances, or because they are the antagonists of that trade.

The subject of prohibition is one that has been infrequently addressed within television studies, with the representational analysis typically focusing more on the depiction of particular drugs

¹⁴ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 218.

and drug users than the larger institutional context that makes drugs illegal. One benefit of *Boardwalk Empire*, aside from its integration of both centrifugal and centripetal narrative complexity, is that its historical setting helps to emphasise the idea of prohibition as a more widespread phenomenon, rather than just the modern ‘War on Drugs’ setting represented in *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad*. Furthermore, it provides a distinct contrast between all three case studies in terms not only of narrative organisation, but also aesthetic approach, as *Boardwalk Empire* draws inspiration from and seeks to recontextualise the classic gangster films that emerged out of the historical context that the series addresses. Thus the selection of the case studies facilitates the combined attention to narrative structure and representational field that constitutes the central interest of this research.

Definition of Key Terms

There are four terms that I am utilising in this thesis that need some explanation here, although they will be more substantially addressed in the literature review. The first is ‘prestige television’. I employ this in lieu of the more widespread term ‘quality television’ due to my desire to avoid the problematic implications that are associated with it. I am using ‘prestige’ in order to emphasise the industrial context in which a particular show was produced and how it fits within the marketing practices of its parent channel. Series like *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* and *Boardwalk Empire* typically have higher per-episode budgets than other shows, yet very often draw small audiences that do not seem to justify the investments being made. The reason why channels like HBO and AMC are willing to bankroll these high-budget, low-ratings series is because they serve a specific function for those channels by bringing in highly sought-after demographics and giving the channel an aura of prestige and distinctiveness that marks them out from the rest of the television landscape. Such shows are not primarily conceived to be ratings hits (though obviously this is also desirable), but rather flagships for the channel that draw

critical plaudits and create ‘buzz’ that increases the profile of the channel and the likelihood that viewers will be inclined to look favourably on future programming from that channel. ‘Prestige’ in this sense is not based on the ‘excellence’ of any given series judged subjectively, but on the understanding that a particular show is being positioned to attract a sense of specialness that will help raise the status of its parent channel in the eyes of viewers, critics and advertisers.

The second term is ‘prohibition’, which I use in its de-historicised and literal sense to mean the outlawing of something – in this instance consciousness-altering substances (principally cocaine and heroin in *The Wire*, alcohol and heroin in *Boardwalk Empire*, and crystal methamphetamine in *Breaking Bad*). This is a term that is widely used in legal, economic and sociological discourse and essentially applies to any situation where a commodity or service is made illegal, usually by government fiat. What is problematic about the word is that in popular discourse Prohibition has become synonymous with the period 1920-1933 when alcohol was illegal in the United States. Even now the word is overwhelmingly used as shorthand for the historical period rather than in its more technical sense. The term is not widely used to refer to the modern prohibition of drugs, perhaps because to do so would be to invite unflattering parallels with a social policy which is now widely regarded as discredited. For clarity, I use ‘Prohibition’ (capitalised) when I am referring to the historical period; otherwise, I use the term in its broader, technical sense.

Another general term that needs some explanation is ‘creators’. I use this as a blanket term meant to include all of the creative personnel working on a particular series. The reasoning behind this decision stems from an appreciation of the collaborative nature of television production, where different episodes are often written, directed or shot by different individuals. Instead of designating every artistic decision to be the sole responsibility of the showrunner, writer, director or any other specific person, referring to the ‘creators’ conveys the same point without invoking the idea of an individual auteur. While not as prevalent as in film studies,

vestiges of auteur theory have crept their way into some of the writing on prestige television, and this can produce conclusions or assertions that distort or misrepresent the text. The use of ‘creators’ counteracts this tendency by emphasising the collective over the individual as a matter of course. It also acknowledges that in the collaborative atmosphere of television production, it is not necessarily accurate to attribute the visual style exclusively to the cinematographer, the structure and dialogue to the writer, or the rhythm and pace to the editor. Instead, the whole of the production is credited to the entire creative ensemble, since no part of that production exists completely independently of any other.

Finally it is necessary to elaborate on the precise meaning of the term ‘plausibility’ which is utilised at various points throughout the case study chapters and conclusion. In his exegesis of *The Wire*, Mittell outlines a definition of plausibility that is roughly analogous to the one being utilised in this research. Mittell states that,

The Wire embraces a fairly traditional mode of social realism, with minimal stylization and strict adherence to norms of accuracy that befit Simon’s background as a journalist; we are asked to judge the storyworld, its characters, and their actions on a metric of plausibility, with success measured by how much the fiction represents society as we know it (or might discover it, if we had the multisite access offered by the series).¹⁵

In this context the term plausibility involves an assessment of the parameters of the world within which the story is contained, and the degree to which any given plot line or character action conflicts with them. As V. F. Perkins writes, “every world has its own norms. Each world holds to beliefs and practices that place things on scales that stretch from the inevitable through the ordinary to the impermissible or the impossible”¹⁶. The use of the term in the case study chapters is centrally concerned with the way each series represents the systemic properties of

¹⁵ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 221.

¹⁶ V. F. Perkins, ‘Where is the World? The Horizon of Events in Movie Fiction’ in Gibbs and Pye (eds.), *Style and Meaning*, p. 32.

prohibition, and how the gradual elaboration of these properties over time accords with the precepts established in earlier episodes. Plausibility in this context is not a matter of fidelity to an understanding of prohibition or society in general which comes from outside of the text. Rather it is a matter of internal consistency which involves the assessment of how seamlessly a particular scene or storyline integrates with the larger patterns and representations of the series as a whole.

Structure and Methodology

Having established the parameters of the inquiry being made in this thesis, the following section will outline both the methodological approach being pursued and the reasons why this approach is best suited to answer the research questions. The fact that no scholarly attention has been focused on the centrifugal/centripetal distinction means that conclusions about its applicability to questions of representation can best be determined through the close textual analysis of each series. Due to the methodology that Mittell pursued, his work is not a fully-comprehensive one, as he mostly avoids issues of style. Mittell writes that,

While the use of visual and aural techniques to convey narrative is an essential part of television, with many complex television programs embracing a broader palette of stylistic techniques to help make them distinctive innovators, I only consider such elements in service of other storytelling goals such as atemporality or character development.¹⁷

It is unsurprising that Mittell is willing to make issues of visual and aural style subordinate to the questions of narration and character that his methodology (characterised as a mix of historical, cognitive and reader-oriented poetics) is best placed to respond to. Moreover, Mittell

¹⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 10.

states his intention to avoid issues of representation in his work on complex TV, writing that “while I would never suggest that scholars should ignore such questions of representation or nation, this book is not focused on analysing meanings as conveyed by television narratives”¹⁸, and that he is foregoing questions of interpretation as much as possible. These gaps in his approach provide the opportunity for this research to develop his ideas both in relation to the formal properties he emphasises, and with regard to the importance of style and its impact on representation.

This speaks to a more general absence within certain approaches to textual analysis in television studies, where even those scholars (like Mittell) who argue in favour of introducing evaluative criticism to the field can still overlook questions of style in larger aesthetic analysis. In one of the few books devoted to the subject of television style and aesthetics, Jacobs and Peacock highlight the fact that even in essay collections dedicated to a specific series it is often possible to read through the entire work without finding any significant discussion of style, mise-en-scène and other related terms. They go on to point out that even a scholar as committed to evaluative criticism as Mittell routinely overlooks discussion of style in his analyses in favour of more formal concerns like narrative, genre and character construction¹⁹. Jacobs and Peacock write that,

We are careful not to conflate or confuse evaluative criticism with stylistic interpretation, though if, as Mittell suggests, there is good reason to follow film studies in a close appraisal of aesthetic merits, then it appears essential to talk not only of meaningful narrative designs but also of points of visual and aural significance.²⁰

There is a certain irony in this since Mittell’s articulation of the centrifugal/centripetal divide was first published in Jacobs and Peacock’s collection, despite its failure to significantly attend

¹⁸ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 4.

¹⁹ Jason Mittell, ‘Lost in a Great Story: Evaluation in Narrative Television (and Television Studies)’ in Roberta Pearson, *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (London: I.B. Tauris), pp. 119-38.

²⁰ Jason Jacobs and Steven Peacock, *Television Aesthetics and Style* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 4.

to the questions of visual and aural significance they raise in their introduction. Regardless, the larger point is that stylistic interpretation, while often closely associated with the practice of evaluative criticism, is not subsumed within it, and integrating stylistic interpretation into more conventional approaches to textual analysis is a necessary development, particularly in a medium that is increasingly emphasising the visual component of its storytelling techniques.

Jacobs and Peacock note that there has been an ongoing shift towards work that addresses individual programmes rather than whole genres or modes, but they also characterise such work as being,

Informed by approaches through which theory is mapped onto the television ‘text’ to decipher its so-called coded meanings. Equally, despite many writers’ assertions that, within these readings, close textual analysis will be employed, there is a key conflation of terms. Too often, such analysis becomes systematic, determined to ‘solve’ the text’s engagement with a specific subject, rather than employing critical principles to feel through its tensions and complexities, keeping them in play. Further, such work resists a dedicated and sustained scrutiny of television style, attempting to undertake ‘close textual analysis’ without getting close to the text’s integral compositional elements.²¹

It is out of a desire to avoid the pitfalls identified by Jacobs and Peacock that this thesis is adopting the approach to textual analysis that they refer to (following Andrew Klevan) as ‘expressive criticism’, following an approach more familiar to film studies and “favoured by such figures as V. F. Perkins, George Wilson and William Rothman”²². This approach is by its very nature less prescriptive in its methodological underpinnings than other approaches to textual analysis which favour a more systematic approach, but which can sometimes overlook those issues of style that Jacobs and Peacock argue are essential to a full understanding of a particular text.

²¹ Jacobs and Peacock, *Television Aesthetics and Style*, p. 2.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 8.

The methodological approach taken in this thesis is consequently a combination of approaches, partly derived from Mittell, partly from Smith's work on the 'structure of sympathy', and partly from the tradition of expressive criticism, which is focused on providing close textual analysis of the way that aesthetic construction of each case study impacts its representation of prohibition, and the extent to which the presence of centrifugal or centripetal serial narration influences these issues. Each chapter is dedicated to a specific case study and is committed to the idea that representational issues cannot be addressed in the same manner in different texts, since there are too many points of difference between each series to establish universally applicable criteria. This emphasis on conducting sustained close readings of individual television shows has not been widespread in television scholarship, although recent years have seen an increase in monographs that incorporate this kind of approach²³. The need to account for the specifics of each series means that the beginning of each case study chapter involves a survey of literature relevant to that specific text, intended to situate the reader and provide a wider context within which the analysis of representation will take place.

The first chapter focuses on *The Wire* and begins by acknowledging the extremely substantial body of scholarship that has accumulated around the series over the past decade, and outlining some of the more general flaws that exist within this material. In particular, this section will argue that the importance of prohibition to the series has been significantly underappreciated, which will be demonstrated through analysis of the overall narrative organisation of the series alongside close readings of the 'cold opens' of each season's opening episode. The rest of the chapter is divided into two parts. The first part analyses the third season's 'Hamsterdam' storyline, in which a police major effectively legalises drugs in his district, and how this provides an opportunity for a sustained representation of the relationship between prohibited markets and the consequences that arise from them. The second section involves the analysis of

²³ See, for example, Greg M. Smith, *Beautiful TV: The Art and Argument of Ally McBeal* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2009); John Caughie, *Edge of Darkness* (London: British Film Institute, 2007); Jason Jacobs, *Deadwood* (London: British Film Institute, 2012); Linda Williams, *On 'The Wire'* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

the three main drug dealers who feature in the story and how each can be understood as embodying specific features of prohibition and the way it operates.

The second chapter deals with *Boardwalk Empire* and the way in which it invokes the aesthetic and thematic tropes of the classic gangster film while revising others as part of a desire to more overtly connect the spectacle of gangster violence with the consequences stemming from the passage of the 18th Amendment and the Prohibition of alcohol. As with the chapter on *The Wire*, the majority of this chapter is divided between two widespread threads, both of which involve the sustained analysis of particular characters that represent Prohibition as a transformational force. In the first section the focus is on the series' central protagonist Nucky Thompson, and follows the corrosion of his character as he navigates the brutal conditions of the bootlegging trade. The second section focuses on the characters of Lucky Luciano (Vincent Piazza) and Meyer Lansky (Anatol Yusef), who begin the series as small-time hoods and end it as the most powerful figures in American organised crime. This section argues that the representation of Luciano and Lansky's ethnicity is part of a wider representational strategy intended to indicate how Prohibition produced a set of conditions that provided a distinct break in the history of American crime and turned it from a local to a national endeavour. This same theme is further emphasised with reference to the representation of heroin within the series how it offers points of comparison between the historical Prohibition of alcohol and the contemporary prohibition of drugs.

The final chapter focuses on *Breaking Bad*, with particular emphasis on the ambiguity that exists not only in relation to the representation of prohibition but more generally throughout the entire series. This chapter analyses the use of specific 'moments' within each season that are used as the starting point for elucidating particular representational issues that are addressed within the series. Furthermore, the chapter focuses on the aesthetic analysis of the series, and makes a case for the consideration of re-watching not only as a necessary prerequisite for textual analysis, but

as a deliberate textual strategy encouraged by the show's aesthetic construction and directly related to its central thematic concerns. The chapter is divided into five sections, each addressing a specific moment from each one of the show's five seasons and then expanding upon the issues it raises. These sections involve analysis of how *mise-en-scène*, editing, camera movement and sound are deployed to articulate and emphasise the show's thematic heft and provide contrasting conclusions regarding the nature of Walter White's personal trajectory and its relationship to the subject of prohibition.

Each of the case study chapters places different emphases on the importance of narrative, character alignment and allegiance, *mise-en-scène*, camera movement, sound and editing, depending on how integral each of these features is in relation to the specific case study's representation of prohibition. While each chapter addresses the way that the narrative organisation of the series affects representation, the most substantial discussion of the differences between centrifugal and centripetal narrative complexity come in the conclusion. This final chapter begins by drawing together the conclusions that end each of the case study chapters to establish the areas of prohibition representation which overlap across each series, as well as those that are less complementary or even contradictory. This will form a base for the assessment of whether Mittell's centrifugal/centripetal designation has more widespread applicability for the practice of textual analysis, indicating those areas where the distinction between the two narrative modes is most pronounced. Finally, I shall reflect on the approach taken in this research and the benefit of combining the tradition of expressive criticism with questions of representation, before offering some suggestions for how some of the conclusions in the thesis could be developed in further research.

The goal of this research is to facilitate the further development of expressive criticism in television studies, but to do so in a manner which explicitly engages with two established currents of television studies research, namely formal analysis and close attention to questions

of representation. The three case studies selected for this research offer the best opportunity for exploring these interrelated issues because they each offer significant differences in terms of style and narrative organisation, but share a broad representational context that provides a clear basis for comparisons to be drawn. This research emphasises both the shared representational concerns of the case studies while also demonstrating how differently the same subject can be characterised, depending on the narrative and aesthetic strategies each series pursues.

Literature Review

This chapter surveys the academic literature relevant to the understanding of the issues being addressed in this research, establishing the wider industrial context out of which the case studies emerged and the way this has been understood by television scholars. Each of the case studies is a prime example of what is typically called ‘quality television’ but which (as explained in the previous chapter) this thesis refers to as ‘prestige television’, and it is the principle underlying this classification that provides the starting point for this chapter. The first section outlines the necessity of understanding the significance of the ‘quality television’ label, the shifting ways that scholars have understood and conceptualised the idea, and the various issues that it raises for this research. As mentioned in the definition of terms, the meaning of the term ‘quality television’ is primarily related to the idea that such television is targeted at audiences that overlook more conventional programming and possess particular attributes viewed as attractive to advertisers, or who are willing to pay a premium for content that is characterised as distinctive or unconventional. In order to convey the impression of distinctiveness and prestige, television creators have utilised a range of textual strategies in order to separate their content from the competition, and this has had a significant impact on how stories are told and what they are about. In regard to the questions being addressed in this research, this context is relevant in a number of ways.

The shift of television from a medium predicated on theories like ‘liveness’ and ‘flow’ has complicated assumptions about the legitimacy of analysing individual television series as bounded works, which has led to a greater emphasis on questions regarding style and aesthetics. The impulse to analyse style as a carrier of meaning, representational complexity and thematic resonance has become not only a matter of scholarly interest, but an approach shared by

significant numbers of television viewers who utilise new technologies to engage in close readings of favoured television texts. Serialisation has become much more prevalent across a broad range of television fiction, and this in turn has stimulated the growth of fully-serialised programmes, as a way for prestige television producers to maintain the distinctiveness of their content. Moreover, the relative freedom enjoyed by basic cable and subscription channels regarding illicit content and controversial subject matter has also proven to be an area where prestige television providers can attempt to convey the specialness of their programming in contrast to network television, resulting in particular kinds of representational issues being favoured. The first part of this chapter establishes the general contextual background of quality television and how its influence has been felt in the areas already mentioned. The following three sections focus on each of the topic headings above. The second section addresses the somewhat contested status of textual analysis as a methodology in television studies, how it has been conceived by scholars, and why the version of it being utilised in this research is both justifiable and necessary. The third section deals with the changes in television narration that have arisen as a result of changes in technology, audience and distribution, with a particular focus on the development of fully-serialised drama series and Jason Mittell's articulation of the centrifugal/centripetal paradigm. The final section addresses the way that the representation of prohibition has been understood in film and television and the ways in which this research aligns or deviates from these models. This section ends with a brief survey of the literature regarding prohibition that comes from outside film and television studies as a way of establishing the parameters of the inquiry that will come in each of the three case study chapters.

Quality Television

The context for this study is the emergence of fictional US television series, typically grouped under the heading of 'quality' or 'prestige' television, which have had a significant impact on

the aesthetic, narrative and representational strategies utilised by television creators²⁴. Deborah Jaramillo notes that, “the term *quality* is tossed about with great frequency but little regard for its disparate meanings among the popular press and interest groups on one hand and among television industry scholars on the other”²⁵. What ‘quality television’ actually signifies has never been particularly stable, as is indicated by Robert Thompson’s expansive statement that “quality TV is best defined by what it is not. It is not ‘regular’ TV”²⁶. Beyond this, various scholars have offered competing definitions, most of which oscillate between the impression that quality television is ‘better’ in some way than ‘regular TV’, while also undermining this perspective by treating it as a broad generic category. Much of the confusion stems from the fact that, as Charlotte Brunsdon has noted, any attempt to ascribe a loaded and evaluative term like ‘quality’ to television inevitably privileges certain forms and tastes over others. Following from the work of Pierre Bourdieu on hierarchies of taste²⁷, Brunsdon writes that “there are always issues of power at stake in notions such as quality and judgement – Quality for whom?, Judgement by whom?, On whose behalf?”²⁸. The problems raised by Brunsdon mean that within television studies the evaluative use of the term ‘quality’ is now generally unacceptable, which can be confusing since this is how the term is normally deployed.

²⁴ For the purposes of this thesis I am marking the beginning of the ‘prestige television’ wave at the point where HBO broadcast its first original drama series *Oz* (HBO, 1997-2003). This is because HBO was and is the most easily identifiable producer of prestige television and introduced many of the innovations in narrative structure, visual sophistication and graphic content that would become hallmarks of prestige television. Furthermore, numerous writers including Robin Nelson (*State of Play: Contemporary ‘High-End’ TV Drama* [Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 2007], p. 1) and Alan Sepinwall (*The Revolution was Televised* [New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013]) have placed the starting point for the current period of critically acclaimed television drama at 1996 or 1997. Another reason to use *Oz* as a starting point is that the previous era of ‘quality’ or ‘high-end’ television drama (such as described by Robert J. Thompson in *Television’s Second Golden Age: From ‘Hill Street Blues’ to ‘ER’* [Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1997]) was overwhelmingly focused on network series and is generally agreed to start with the programmes made by MTM productions, especially *Hill Street Blues* (NBC, 1981-1987), which Thompson and Nelson both highlight as the beginning of modern ‘quality’ television.

²⁵ Deborah L. Jaramillo, ‘The Family Racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the Construction of a Quality Brand’ in Horace Newcomb (ed.), *Television: The Critical View*, 7th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 585.

²⁶ Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age*, p. 13.

²⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (London: Routledge, 2010).

²⁸ Charlotte Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes: Soap Opera to Satellite Dishes* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 130.

As Jane Feuer noted when considering the earliest American series to attract the ‘quality’ label, made by the MTM production company, there are two distinct ways that ‘quality’ is used, even once one excludes any notion that the term is meant to be evaluative²⁹. On one hand it is used to indicate something about the formal qualities or creative context of a given series (visual style, performance, perception of innovation and artistic freedom). On the other it indicates the industrial context (who the target audience is, how it is branded and marketed). As Robin Nelson has noted, one of the problems with using ‘quality’ to indicate particular aesthetic aspects of a television series is that such features are inevitably in a state of flux³⁰. This fact is acknowledged by Thompson when looking back on his earlier discussion of quality, saying “about 12 years ago, I defined ‘quality TV’ with a list of a dozen characteristics. Now I can find a lot of shows on the air that exhibit all 12 characteristics but in the end, aren’t really that good”³¹. Using the term as shorthand for particular textual features is now mostly pointless, since there have never been stable criteria for what properties a quality show possesses, and the problematic nature of the term makes such determinations fraught with opportunities for confusion and impreciseness. In any event, there is no need to try and use ‘quality’ in this context, since there are plenty of precise terms that can be used to point out particular textual features, and trying to corral them under a single heading seems needlessly reductive and complicated³².

For this research what is really relevant in the debates about ‘quality television’ is the industrial context, where ‘quality’ refers primarily to the audience that a particular programme or channel wants to reach. Jancovich and Lyons outline how this definition of ‘quality’ developed;

²⁹ Jane Feuer, ‘MTM Enterprises: An Overview’ in Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (eds.), *MTM ‘Quality Television’* (London: BFI, 1984), pp. 1-31; Jane Feuer, ‘The MTM Style’ in Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi (eds.), *MTM ‘Quality Television’*, pp. 32-60.

³⁰ Nelson, *State of Play*, p. 4.

³¹ Robert J. Thompson, ‘Preface’ in Janet McCabe and Kim Akass (eds.), *Quality TV: Contemporary Television and Beyond* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris, 2007), p. xx.

³² For an overview of the ‘quality television’ debates see McCabe and Akass, *Quality TV*; Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*; Mark Jancovich and James Lyons (eds.), *Quality Popular Television: Cult TV, the Industry and Fans* (London: British Film Institute, 2003); Feuer, Kerr and Vahimagi, *MTM - ‘Quality Television’*.

As network audiences declined in the face of competition from the proliferation of cable and satellite channels in the 1980s, the networks became less concerned with attracting mass audiences and increasingly concerned with retaining the most *valuable* audiences: affluent viewers that advertisers were prepared to pay the highest rates to address.³³

This is the one aspect of ‘quality television’ where there is widespread agreement amongst scholars. Nelson writes that “distinctive programming is required in a highly competitive environment. Whatever exactly quality television comprises, channels want to be associated with it and, network, cable or subscription, they have rebranded themselves accordingly”³⁴. Thompson states that “quality TV attracts an audience with blue chip demographics. The upscale, well-educated, urban-dwelling, young viewers advertisers so desire to reach tend to make up a much larger percentage of the audience of these shows than of other kinds of programs”³⁵. In these accounts what really distinguishes ‘quality television’ is not any particular formal convention, but the audience that watches it. Whereas in previous eras the goal of a television series was to reach as wide an audience as possible, ‘quality television’ series are targeted at much smaller but demographically desirable audiences who are drawn to such programming at least partly because of the features that mean it is unlikely to reach a broad audience³⁶. For network and cable channels the ‘quality’ audience is one that ticks the various demographic boxes outlined by Thompson; for subscription channels it is simply those who have the means to keep paying their fee every month. In this context ‘quality television’ could essentially be understood as any programming that appeals to the type of audience that a particular channel wishes to attract. While there have clearly been certain types of television that have been perceived to achieve this goal, nothing about the actual purpose of ‘quality television’

³³ Janovich and Lyons, *Quality Popular Television*, p. 3.

³⁴ Robin Nelson, ‘Quality TV Drama’ in McCabe and Akass (eds.), *Quality TV*, p. 45.

³⁵ Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age*, p. 14.

³⁶ For the full list of features see Thompson, *Ibid.*, p. 13-16

insists on a particular genre or formal approach – quality is merely whatever attracts a desirable audience demographic³⁷.

In the context of recent American television, the channels that have been most closely linked with the new wave of prestige television are all found either on basic cable (AMC, F/X) or are subscription/premium channels (HBO, Showtime) which are paid for separately. As Feuer writes, “although a cable service such as HBO has a very small audience of subscribers, much smaller than the equivalent audience for network quality drama, they happen to be the very upscale demographic willing to pay extra for more specialised and more highbrow fare”³⁸. The situation is slightly different with basic cable stations like AMC, as Anthony Smith explains;

Basic cable series, in contrast with premium cable commissions but in common with network series, are ad supported; thus, commercial pods usually punctuate their episode transmissions. However, basic cable institutions are also uniquely provided a significant supplementary income by local cable operators who pay institutions carriage fees for the right to incorporate their channels in the basic cable packages they sell to viewers³⁹.

What this indicates is that while premium and basic cable channels have somewhat different economic models, the goals of the prestige television series they produce are very similar.

Prestige shows are designed to be highly esteemed and valued by the audiences for whom they are intended, to the point where the audience is induced to either pay a monthly fee in order to keep watching their favourite series, or they demand or select a cable package that contains the channel that their favoured prestige shows are on (and where eager advertisers are waiting for them).

³⁷ For a critique of the arguments surrounding Quality TV see Sudeep Dasgupta, ‘Policing the People: Television Studies and the Problem of “Quality”’, *NECSUS: European Journal of Media Studies* 1.1 (2012): pp. 35-53.

³⁸ Jane Feuer, ‘HBO and the Concept of Quality TV’ in McCabe and Akass, *Quality TV*, p. 147.

³⁹ Anthony N. Smith, ‘Putting the Premium into Basic: Slow-Burn Narratives and the Loss-Leader Function of AMC’s Original Drama Series’, *Television New Media* 14:2 (March 2013), p. 152.

While prestige television is often marketed as distinct or different from the rest of television, convincing an audience that this is the case is still a challenge that has to be overcome. One clear issue that arises is that prestige series must establish that they are an example of the form while also emphasising their specialness in relation to the rest of the television landscape. As Thompson indicated above, attempting to compile a list of features shared by prestige series is unlikely to be a particularly illuminating approach, since deviating from what is typical is part of the point of prestige series. However, it is possible to identify several areas where the impulse to produce distinctive and unconventional programming has broadened the range of possibilities open to television creators and instigated various changes in the form and content contained within the series they produce.⁴⁰

Illicit Content and Prohibition

While individual series may vary, when it comes to current American prestige television there are a number of features which recur frequently and are intended to act as indicators to the prestige audience that a particular series is being tailored to their tastes. Rather than aspects of the series' structural and aesthetic construction (serial narrative, 'cinematic' style, anti-heroic protagonists), these features have to do with demonstrating that prestige series are not constrained by the rules that govern 'normal' television, thus separating prestige shows from the rest of the herd. This approach has been most pronounced on HBO, where there are effectively no restrictions on the content that can be included since it is a subscription channel and thus not regulated either by the Federal Communications Commission (which oversees content on network television) or by the dictates of advertisers nervous about being seen endorsing

⁴⁰ For more on how distinction is constructed through marketing and production discourses, see Dana Polan, 'Cable Watching: HBO, *The Sopranos*, and Discourses of Distinction' in Sarah Banet-Weiser, Cynthia Chris, Anthony Freitas (eds.), *Cable Visions: Television Beyond Broadcasting* (New York: New York University Press, c2007), pp. 261-83; Avi Santo, 'Para-Television and Discourses of Distinction: The Culture of Production at HBO' in Mark Leverette, Brian L. Ott, and Cara Louise Buckley (eds.) *It's Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era* (New York: Routledge, 2008), pp. 19-45; Robin Nelson, 'HBO Premium: Channelling Distinction Through TVIII', *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 5:1 (April 2007), pp. 25-40.

controversial content (as with basic cable channels). As McCabe and Akass have demonstrated, “the station makes a virtue of its autonomy from the constraints and restrictions limiting network television. Institutional power comes from asserting pleasure in scandalising and flouting, from pushing boundaries by broadcasting profanity, brutal violence and explicit sex scenes not seen (until recently) elsewhere”⁴¹. By producing series that contain content that could not be shown on network television or basic cable, HBO is able to point to obvious instances where its original programming is unlike anything else available, inflating the cultural cachet of the channel and cementing its advertising promise that ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO’⁴². The inclusion of illicit content⁴³ not only marks out HBO as a channel that can do things other channels cannot, it also gives it the impression of being a place for discerning adults who aren’t offended or scandalised by profanity, violence or sexual content.

Moreover, as McCabe and Akass note, “evoking ideas of quality in terms of creative risk-taking and artistic integrity are cited as a way of justifying the explicitness of what can be allowed. HBO takes control of the illicit and encloses it within its institutional discourse of quality”⁴⁴. The impression that HBO wants to convey is that the lack of restrictions placed on television creators with regard to illicit content is part of a broader HBO attitude that is about giving writers and directors a level of creative freedom that no other channel affords. All of this is intended to boost the perceived artistic validity and excellence of HBO’s original programming, prompting people to see the channel not just as a location for quality television, but as an incubator whose primary goal is the continued production of televisual art. McCabe and Akass write that “the suggestion here is that the HBO audience authorise the illicit and safeguard

⁴¹ Janet McCabe and Kim Akass, ‘Sex, Swearing and Respectability: Courting Controversy, HBO’s Original Programming and Producing Quality TV’ in McCabe and Akass (eds.), *Quality TV*, p.66.

⁴² For more on HBO’s institutional history and marketing strategies, see Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (eds.), *The Essential HBO Reader* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2008); Leverette, Ott and Buckley (eds.), *It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era*.

⁴³ Clearly ‘illicit’ does not mean ‘illegal’ in this context as it does elsewhere in this thesis, but refers to the depiction of criminal, socially unacceptable or morally dubious activity of a kind which would not be tolerated by a mainstream audience.

⁴⁴ McCabe and Akass, ‘Sex, Swearing and Respectability’, p. 69

institutional freedoms to defy established broadcasting regulations, lifting prohibitions and reinvigorating television fiction in the process”⁴⁵.

While AMC cannot get away with everything HBO does, it still operates at the boundaries of what is tolerated on basic cable by including gory violence, profanity, drug use and sexual content that is unlike the vast majority of American television. A consequence of tying notions of artistic freedom and creativity to the lifting of content restrictions is that the series commissioned by prestige television channels often involve diegetic environments where illicit content can be seamlessly woven into the narrative. When considered from this perspective, the preponderance of series where prohibition is a significant element of the plot becomes easy to appreciate. Since the drug trade is illegal many of the people involved in it are gangsters who have a vested interest in maintaining control over a highly lucrative but illegal trade, and are thus often disposed to use violence in order to resolve conflict. Even uninformed viewers are likely to have some sense that disputes between drug gangs have a tendency to turn violent, meaning that stories that take place within or adjacent to the drug trade immediately raise the stakes, because violence is such a plausible possibility. Organised crime/gangster narratives also provide ample justification for the other prestige distinction markers, particularly sex and nudity since the sex trade is similarly prohibited and subject to criminal gang activity. Not only do drug trade narratives have the inbuilt attraction of containing lots of imagery of drugs and drug use, they also provide ample motivation for scenes of violence and gunplay, not to mention prostitutes and strippers, while the sense that criminals are at the edges of social respectability condones the excessive or violent profanity unavailable to network audiences.

The benefit of illicit content, McCabe and Akass note, is that it can be utilised as a short-hand that immediately establishes the separation between prestige television and more typical network programming. The restrictions placed on network television by the FCC and (at least traditionally) by advertisers created fairly rigid boundaries that could not be violated, and thus

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

violating those boundaries became a very direct way to establish difference. In other areas of production, the difference between prestige and non-prestige television is far more ambiguous. Both popularly and within academia there has been a conflation of prestige television with what is typically described as a ‘cinematic’ visual look – an ill-defined concept that can incorporate anything from camerawork to production design to budgets to the involvement of celebrated movie stars. The issue with this definition (as will be explained further below) is that television producers and critics have been characterising the visual construction of television series as ‘cinematic’ for over two decades without any strong sense of what the term denotes⁴⁶. Moreover, it is invariably the case that any claim made about the aesthetic particulars of a prestige series could also be applied to a network series. At the same time, the continued emphasis on the visual component of prestige television clearly indicates that even if the claims being made are incomplete or over-stated, critics and audiences are at least paying greater attention to issues of television style, and that this in turn creates an expectation that prestige shows will devote significant effort to rewarding that attention, even if only cursorily. As Janet McCabe writes,

HBO originals continue to erase straightforward distinctions defining the medium. Of course television cinematography is evolving as is the entire home viewing experience. HBO anticipates higher audience expectations even as it contributes to changing our assumptions about that very experience through its discrete distribution spaces and exclusive viewing domain.⁴⁷

While the popular characterisation of television’s aesthetic development is somewhat galling to TV scholars, it does indicate the effectiveness of this line of promotion within the marketing of prestige series, suggesting that it is something which audiences find desirable and meaningful as

⁴⁶ For discussion of the problematic use of ‘cinematic’ in TV studies see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (Oxford, UK; New York: Routledge, 2012), pp. 100-128; Jane Feuer, ‘HBO and the Concept of Quality TV’ in McCabe and Akass, *Quality TV*, pp. 145-157.

⁴⁷ Janet McCabe, ‘HBO Aesthetics, Quality Television and *Boardwalk Empire*’ in Jacobs and Peacock, *Television Aesthetics and Style*, p. 195-196.

a point of distinction. One question that the inclusion of close textual analysis as a methodology is capable of answering is whether this emphasis on ‘cinematic’ visuals should be understood as simply a re-emphasis of the conditions that prompted John T. Caldwell to conceive the category of ‘televisuality’⁴⁸ in the 1990s, or whether it represents a different kind of development. What seems apparent is that from the perspective of both producers and audiences, television style not only exists but has become one of the leading areas in which a programme’s artistic legitimacy can be established and marketed.

The last significant areas in which the need to convey an impression of specialness has driven prestige television series to produce innovation are narrative and character. As already discussed in the introduction, earlier attempts to appeal to the prestige television audience drove the development of ‘narrative complexity’ as a distinct form of television narrative, to the point where it has become the most typical kind of narration for American television drama. A consequence of these developments has been that narrative complexity no longer conveys the same aura of distinctiveness that it once did, meaning that series wishing to seem narratively innovative had to pursue different strategies. The emergence of fully-serialised immense series can partly be seen as a reaction to the growing ubiquity of narrative complexity and, in recent years, a consequence of the new models of internet distribution that encourages multi-episode sustained viewing (‘binge-watching’) and thus facilitates the comprehension of fully-serialised series. While seriality has been broadly integrated into network television drama, the need to sustain a large week-to-week audience often limits how heavy the serialisation can be. With prestige television channels and online libraries there is more emphasis on sustaining a small but devoted audience, something that dense, drawn-out, fully-serialised narratives can accomplish.

As with all of the examples cited in this section, the persistence of a particular marker of prestige television is always likely to be tied to how prevalent it has become in the wider context

⁴⁸ John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995).

of American television. As new television producers continue to enter the increasingly crowded marketplace looking to attract new subscribers and viewers, the importance of distinctive content for establishing and sustaining audience interest is likely to continue. It is clearly important to continue to study and understand the evolution of the television industry in terms of its industrial and technological changes, but this must also be accompanied by analysis that can identify how these features influence the text itself, which can only be done through the deployment of textual analysis in such a way that it is able to adequately characterise the nuances of individual programmes. Only by paying attention to each end of the production process can the impact of these changes be adequately perceived and articulated. The following section surveys the history of textual analysis in television studies, discusses why it is still a somewhat contested and uncertain methodology, and then outlines the approach being pursued in this research and why it represents the best option for the project at hand.

Television Aesthetics and Textual Analysis

Television Style

Throughout most of its history, television studies as a discipline has typically avoided attempts to consider television from an aesthetic perspective, preferring to view it as a medium of mass communication rather than as a form of artistic expression⁴⁹. As Sarah Cardwell writes when discussing the contested nature of television aesthetics,

The term functions as a signifier of difference and distinctiveness within the field of television studies, wherein approaches that focus on sociological, ideological and

⁴⁹ See, for example, Jason Jacobs, *British Television Drama: The Intimate Screen* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

broader cultural matters, but which neglect stylistic analysis and reject aesthetic evaluation, have been historically dominant.⁵⁰

Each of these approaches avoided attending to television's expressive properties and instead focused on issues of ideology, semiotics, audience reception and various other contexts that influenced how television is produced, distributed and consumed. Christine Geraghty writes that "most textual analysis of television pays attention to narrative as an organizing system but devotes less space to other elements such as the audio and visual organisation"⁵¹. For Geraghty this has historically been because "television's audio/visual pleasures are often deemed to be limited by size of screen and poor-quality image. At various points, critics have argued that television's visual resources are too limited for aesthetic pleasure"⁵².

The development of the analysis of television style often paralleled significant changes in technology. The ephemerality of television influenced early work, which tended to focus on theories and approaches that encompassed the whole medium, such as Raymond Williams' concept of 'flow'⁵³ or Horace Newcomb's emphasis on the intimacy of the television screen⁵⁴. As technologies like the VCR made it possible to detach individual programmes from the flow of the television broadcast, increased attention began to be paid to the aesthetic construction of television series, most significantly in John Caldwell's work on 'televisuality'⁵⁵. Caldwell identified how the arrival of cable television in the United States proved a spur to creativity and innovation within the television industry, assisted by technological developments that made it increasingly easy to produce visually distinctive programming. The advent of cable meant that the programming options available to the consumer multiplied significantly, and the arrival of

⁵⁰ Sarah Cardwell, 'Television Aesthetics: Stylistic Analysis and Beyond' in Jacobs and Peacock (eds.), *Television Aesthetics and Style*, p. 23.

⁵¹ Christine Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and Quality in Popular Television Drama', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 6:1 (March 2003), p. 33.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, (London: Fontana, 1974).

⁵⁴ Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (New York: Anchor Books, 1974).

⁵⁵ John T. Caldwell, *Televisuality*.

the remote control meant that channel surfing for compelling content became an influential aspect of television viewing. In response to this, television producers sought to give their programmes a distinctive visual aesthetic that could stand out in the crowded televisual landscape. While Caldwell characterises these aesthetic developments as being almost entirely concerned with surface appeal, rather than expressive potential, the status of television as a primarily dialogue-based form of communication was being gradually eroded.

In his research, Caldwell also challenged the claims about television viewing made by critics like John Ellis, who sought to establish an essentialist argument about the differences in viewing experience between television and cinema. During the 1980s Ellis argued that while cinema has historically been understood to encourage the ‘gaze’ of the audience (involved, attentive, active), television’s domestic setting, lack of sophistication, and visual simplicity meant that it was watched with a ‘glance’ (distracted, inattentive, passive)⁵⁶. As Caldwell demonstrated, even at the point when Ellis was writing his book (early 1980s), series like *Miami Vice* (NBC, 1984-1990) were already challenging Ellis’ conclusions. As Caldwell writes,

Not only is television currently stylish, but it can be stylish in an extremely self-conscious and analytical way. While high theory was speculating on television as a distracting verbal-aural phenomenon, something very different was happening within the producing industry. There, in producer story sessions, in conversations between DPs and gaffers on sets, and among editors in postproduction suites, an awareness was growing of television as a style-driven phenomenon heavily dependent on the visual.⁵⁷

The status of television as a visual medium was already well established when Caldwell’s work was published, and it has only become more relevant and accurate in the past twenty years as technological development has continued. As Creeber notes, “with the introduction of Home cinema, Wide/Plasma screens, High Definition, Surround Sound, DVD and Blu-Ray, some

⁵⁶ John Ellis, *Visible Fictions: Cinema, Television, Video* (London: Routledge, 1992).

⁵⁷ Caldwell, *Televisuality*, p. 83.

critics [have] argued that the boundaries between cinema and television [are] increasingly merging”⁵⁸. While it is true that these developments have not had equal impact on every genre of television, it is certainly the case that television drama has increasingly sought to convey information visually rather than aurally⁵⁹.

These developments have contributed to the growing uses of textual analysis within television studies, with a particular emphasis being placed on questions of style. Discussing this increased emphasis on the analysis of style in television studies, Robin Nelson writes;

This emphasis arises partly from the creative exploitation of the better quality of the medium’s sound and image and partly because, in an age of well-produced DVDs of major television series, it has become possible for close textual readings on repeated viewings, both by fans and academics alike. Above all, however, it is because the ‘high-end’ of small screen fictions aspires to cinematic production values... The visual style, the ‘look’, of TV drama texts has become another key aspect, besides narrative form and other principles of composition, to invite analysis.⁶⁰

For scholars like Nelson, Creeber, Geraghty and others who have advocated a greater role for textual analysis, particularly in relation to questions of style, part of the motivation is that both scholars and viewers have benefitted from changes in technology that make such analysis much easier and thus more widespread. More recently, Jeremy Butler has provided a significant formalist overview of the stylistic properties of television, which takes a primarily historical approach to the analysis of television style, tracing the relationship between industrial and technological changes in the industry and the way these have impacted the appearance of television programming⁶¹. The changes effected by technological developments have placed a

⁵⁸ Glen Creeber, ‘It’s Not TV, It’s Online Drama: The Return of the Intimate Screen’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 14:6 (November 2011), p. 594.

⁵⁹ For more see Jeremy G. Butler, *Television Style*, (New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁰ Nelson, *State of Play*, pp. 10-11.

⁶¹ Butler, *Television Style*.

greater emphasis on questions of television style, both within the academy and within the wider television industry. Yet for some scholars it is precisely because the aesthetic status of television drama series has become so validated that caution should be taken by television scholars not to fall into undesirable habits (principally aesthetic evaluation). At the same time, there are numerous scholars who see those same habits as both desirable and necessary for the further development of textual analysis and television studies in general. Before addressing how this research is positioned in relation to these on-going debates, it is worth considering the position of textual analysis throughout the development of television studies as a discipline.

TV Studies and Textual Analysis

Textual analysis has had a somewhat contested history in the development of television studies, at least partly because of how interdisciplinary the discipline has been since its inception, and also partly because its early adopters came from a range of academic traditions. While it is somewhat reductive, the major distinction that existed and to some extent still exists is between the more quantitative and scientific methodologies pursued by scholars from the social sciences, and the more qualitative and subjective approach favoured by scholars from the arts and humanities. As Newman and Levine write,

Much of the early academic study of the medium was undertaken within the largely American field of mass communication, which typically relied upon social-scientific methods in considering television's effects upon its viewers and the larger populace... less common was the study of television programming as texts, as works of art or even generators of meaning, though some more humanistic television inquiry was underway as early as 1962.⁶²

⁶² Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, p. 156.

The problem for the arts and humanities practitioners, particularly those committed to the kind of close textual reading found in film studies and English literature, was that the cultural status of television (along with the audio and visual constraints of the technology) was so low that it was very difficult to convince sceptical observers that television was worthy of the same kind of attention. Regardless of whether this was true, it posed a significant problem for those wishing to study the medium as a whole – studying television as if it were an art form like literature or cinema was bound to draw ridicule, so the focus shifted to those areas that were less reliant on textual analysis, or textual analysis became incorporated into more acceptable areas of inquiry.

Another significant obstacle to the practice of textual analysis within television studies was the influence of post-structuralism and the emergence of audience studies, both of which challenged the viability of textual analysis as a methodology. As Nelson outlines;

Post-structuralism, having established the multi-vocality, or slipperiness of the sign and the process of signification, was broadly disseminated in television studies through John Fiske's *Television Culture*. The idea of the 'polysemic' text gave full rein to a range of readings from a variety of reading positions. The findings of 1980s audience research into how people actually read television seemed to confirm reception theory's emphasis on a lack of textual fixity.⁶³

While not the originator of these ideas⁶⁴, Fiske's book was particularly influential in introducing audience studies to television scholars and thus proved particularly significant in the development of the discipline. The development of ethnographic research not only foregrounded the value of empirical evidence in studying television, but significantly undermined the validity

⁶³ Robin Nelson, 'Quality Television: *The Sopranos* is the Best Television Drama Ever... In My Humble Opinion...', *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies* 1:1 (2006), pp. 58-71. ...', p. 65.

⁶⁴ See for example, Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/Decoding' in Stuart Hall, Dorothy Hobson, Andrew Lowe and Paul Willis (eds.), *Culture, Media, Language* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), pp. 128-138; Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley, *Everyday Television 'Nationwide'* (London: British Film Institute, 1978); David Morley, *The 'Nationwide' Audience: Structure and Decoding* (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas: Soap Opera and the Melodramatic Imagination* (London: Methuen, 1985).

of textual analysis as an approach. Audience research clearly demonstrated that television texts could be read by different viewers in vastly different ways depending on their class, race, gender, sexuality or nationality. This being so, any attempt on the part of a television scholar to produce a reading primarily based on textual analysis was considered somewhat suspect, as on some level it implied that there was an 'ideal' reader who would view the same text in the same way, even though the evidence demonstrated this was not the case. As Glen Creeber summarises;

If audiences can read a text in a number of ways, then what is the validity and relevance of one textual interpretation? A textual analyst may give their reading intellectual credibility through the application of a dense theoretical discourse (like semiotics or psychoanalysis), but it is still only one interpretation among many.⁶⁵

On a general level these developments were desirable, particularly because they demonstrated that the television audience was not merely a passive sponge for the dominant ideological messages being conveyed through television programming. As Fiske wrote, "to be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways"⁶⁶. The consequence of these developments in the 1980s was that textual analysis became increasingly unfashionable as a methodological approach and, as Creeber writes, "for many textual analysis became the remnant of an embarrassing (literary and even Leavisite) tradition that was now despised and ridiculed, and was regarded by some as intellectually simplistic and passé"⁶⁷.

This condition persisted long enough that as recently as the late 1990s, Charlotte Brunsdon could survey the current state of television studies and write that "academic and popular writing

⁶⁵ Glen Creeber, 'The Joy of Text?: Television and Textual Analysis', *Critical Studies in Television: The International Journal of Television Studies*, 1:1 (Spring 2006), p. 82.

⁶⁶ John Fiske, *Television Culture*, 2nd edn. (London; New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 66.

⁶⁷ Creeber, 'Joy of Text', p. 83.

about the medium is haunted by anxiety about the cultural legitimacy of watching television”⁶⁸. Yet only a few years later followed calls from Jason Jacobs and Christine Geraghty to not only embrace textual analysis as a methodology, but to do so in relation to the subject of evaluation. Moreover, Jacobs directly linked this impulse to changes in television content, arguing that “the continued sense that the television text is mostly inferior to the film text and cannot withstand concentrated critical pressure because it lacks ‘symbolic density’, rich mise-en-scène, and the promotion of identification as a means of securing audience proximity, has to be revised in the light of contemporary television”⁶⁹. While the question of evaluation has continued to struggle to find widespread acceptance, the debate that has grown up around the issue has clearly had a galvanising force on the use of textual analysis in television studies, and the anxiety about television’s cultural legitimacy is no longer apparent either amongst scholars or popular writers.

The Aesthetics Debate

In recognition of these developments, the past fifteen years have seen a growing scholarly interest in the aesthetic analysis of television that utilises methods of close reading and textual analysis which have more typically been found in film studies. For the reasons set out above, this has prompted heated debate, particularly when such analysis is accompanied by an evaluative element that valorises a particular programme because of some purported exemplary element of its artistic construction⁷⁰. Christine Geraghty, Jacobs and Cardwell have all called for a greater emphasis and appreciation of those aspects of television texts that television scholars

⁶⁸ Charlotte Brunsdon, ‘What is the “Television” of Television Studies?’ in Christine Geraghty and David Lusted (eds.), *The Television Studies Book* (London: Arnold, 1998), p. 96.

⁶⁹ Jason Jacobs, ‘Issues of Judgement’, p. 433.

⁷⁰ For further examples see John Caughie, *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism and British Culture*, (Oxford University Press 2000); John Caughie, ‘Telephilia and Distraction: Terms of Engagement’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 3:1 (May 2006), pp. 5-18; Ted Nannicelli, ‘Ontology, Intentionality and Television Aesthetics’, *Screen* 53:2 (Summer 2012), pp. 164-179; Jason Jacobs, ‘The Medium in Crisis: Caughie, Brunsdon and the Problem of US Television’, *Screen* 52:4 (Winter 2011), pp. 503-511; Jeffrey Sconce, ‘What If?: Charting Television’s New Textual Boundaries’ in Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson (eds.), *Television After TV: Essays on A Medium in Transition*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 93-112.

consider particularly worthy of attention⁷¹. Rather than attempting to construct an account of television aesthetics that encompasses the whole medium, as earlier theorists like Williams and Ellis did, these authors argue that different criteria should be established for different categories of television, and that this process necessarily involves aesthetic evaluation. As Mittell explains,

An evaluative critique does not aspire to the status of fact or proof. By claiming that a given program is good or that one series is better than another, I am making an argument that I believe to be true, but it is not a truth claim... evaluation is an act of persuasion rather than demonstration.⁷²

The overt focus on aesthetics and evaluation is also meant to acknowledge that, as Cardwell writes,

The selection of programmes for analysis and criticism within any particular approach, for any specific purposes, including aesthetic ones, is in some sense an *evaluative* action that recommends particular texts to other viewers... Texts are selected precisely because they fulfil, for each writer, the functions that their particular approach requires. If the writer is interested in aesthetic concerns, he or she will be by definition drawn to texts that best reward those interests.⁷³

The writers most invested in the development of television aesthetics take the position that it is acceptable to try and engage the reader through the detailed explication of their own subjective enjoyment of a given series or episode, provided one is upfront about the assumptions that one brings to one's work.

This remains controversial. The most prominent critic is Matt Hills, who describes the whole project as 'dangerous'. Hills argues that an aesthetic evaluation necessarily involves the scholar

⁷¹ Sarah Cardwell, 'Television Aesthetics', *Critical Studies in Television*, 1:1 (Spring 2006), pp. 72-80; Geraghty, 'Aesthetics and Quality'; Jason Jacobs, 'Issues of Judgement and Value in Television Studies', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4:4 (December 2001), pp. 427-447.

⁷² Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 207.

⁷³ Cardwell, 'Stylistic Analysis and Beyond', p. 37.

advancing their own subjective taste in a way that makes it seem objective or inevitable. Despite the denials of the critics, he says, there remains what he calls a ‘pre-structuralist’ philosophy at play in their arguments, which are “readily identifiable by virtue of the fact that they position aesthetic value as textually inherent (that is transcendent) rather than as textually and evaluatively relational”⁷⁴. Hills still sees evidence of ‘traditional aesthetic discourse’ in much of their work – a tendency to treat particular qualities as objectively rather than subjectively valuable. Hills claims that these underlying tendencies in the work of television aesthetes carry “dangers for the debate over TV and value, because it threatens surreptitiously and unreflexively to reinstall versions of aesthetics to which TV studies and cultural studies were arguably founded in opposition”⁷⁵.

Hills argues that if any criteria of aesthetic value are to apply, they should be determined by the audience, not by the academy;

Focusing on how academics could or should make value judgements about television means adopting a specific position from which to speak and write. However, an alternative position could involve not setting out scholarly judgements of value, however provisional these may be, but rather investigating how aesthetic judgements are made by all sorts of non-academic audiences.⁷⁶

The problem, as Brunsdon has noted, is that this attitude has resulted in a situation where “there is something rather odd about our fascination with what ‘real’ (i.e., other, non-academic) people think about television when it is combined with a principled refusal to reveal what academics think about it”⁷⁷. Jacobs is more pointed in his rejection of Hills’ argument, writing that “flattery of the ordinary, while it purports to be ever so democratic and inclusive is actually patronising

⁷⁴ Matt Hills, ‘Television Aesthetics: A Pre-Structuralist Danger?’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 8:1 (April 2011), p. 99.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷⁷ Brunsdon, *Screen Tastes*, p. 112.

and reactionary: it rests on the assumption that the audience is incapable of change, cultivation or enlightenment”⁷⁸.

What this research takes to be evident from these debates is that, regardless of the degree to which one agrees or disagrees with the desirability of aesthetic evaluation in television studies, they clearly indicate that continuing to defer engagement with television’s stylistic and expressive qualities for fear of conferring too much credibility on the evaluative tendencies of some television scholars is impoverishing the discipline and limiting the efficacy of textual analysis, regardless of the ends to which it is put.

Expressive Criticism

As previously discussed in the introduction, the principal methodological approach to textual analysis in this research is identified as ‘expressive criticism’, a term that is not widely used within television studies, although the approach itself is increasingly popular. Aligning this study with expressive criticism is likely to be viewed with scepticism by some television scholars, since its origins are in a film studies tradition of *mise-en-scène* criticism that in many cases was part of the attempt to emphasise the importance of the director as the source of artistry in a given cinematic text. While the authority granted to the director in these accounts was both simplistic and excessive, as a rhetorical strategy intended to align cinema with more established artistic forms, particularly literature, it helped establish that Hollywood films were more complex and interesting than had previously been accepted. As Jeremy Butler notes, “when François Truffaut and his colleagues at *Cahiers du Cinéma* launched auteur theory in the mid-1950s, they never thought to unearth auteurs within the television industry, because the medium was seen to be aesthetically stunted and an industrial product – even more so than the

⁷⁸ Jacobs, ‘An Infantile Disorder’, p. 31.

Hollywood film studio system's products"⁷⁹. The influence of these and other critics (such as those associated with the British journal *Movie* like V. F. Perkins, Robin Wood and Douglas Pye) was instrumental in raising the cultural legitimacy of the work they addressed and the assimilation of film studies as an academic discipline⁸⁰. While these approaches fell out of fashion within film studies as more hermeneutic approaches were developed and embraced, since the turn of the millennium there has been a renewed interest in close textual reading, mirroring the rise of television aesthetics as an area of scholarly interest and debate. In both cases there is a clear sense on the part of scholars that the expressive potential of the medium under analysis has been significantly undervalued or neglected, and that the adoption of an expressive criticism approach represents the best way to demonstrate how multifaceted the construction of screen fiction can be.

Within this research the utilisation of expressive criticism is not intended to be taken as an attempt to confer greater legitimacy on television as a medium, nor to argue for the excellence of a particular series, or to try and establish a criterion for evaluating television. While it has typically been associated with approaches that involve an explicitly evaluative dimension, there is nothing that necessitates that this be the case. Rather, as Sarah Cardwell writes, it is an approach that represents "a movement away from approaches that 'use' television to study something else (for example, society, ideology, gender politics) and toward a recognition of television as a medium of expression first and foremost, and of programmes as specific artworks"⁸¹. In this regard this thesis is perhaps closest to Jonathan Bignell's work on the police series, which Bignell directly links to "the procedures of mise-en-scène criticism in academic film studies from which many of the analytical techniques used in this study derive (see Gibbs

⁷⁹ Jeremy Butler, *Television Style*, p.2.

⁸⁰ For a full account of this history see John Gibbs, *The Life of Mise-en-Scene: Visual Style and British Film Criticism, 1946-78* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013).

⁸¹ Cardwell, 'Television Aesthetics', p. 72.

and Pye, 2005)”,⁸². Bignell’s focus is on the way in which the style of individual police series influences the ideological precepts of the genre, and while his work is still fundamentally one driven by his own interpretations of the text, it does not attempt to make evaluative claims.

Bignell writes that at the heart of his approach;

Is the simple argument that visual style is significant to the meanings of these programmes, and is not a factor that can be separated from their generic narrative components, character dynamics or ideological stance, for example. Following from this, visual style is argued to be the crucial means that determines the nature and degree of the viewer’s access to a programme’s fictional world.⁸³

The decision to focus on a particular aspect of a television series like ideology or representation is usually a necessary one, as it limits the scope of inquiry and produces more precise analysis, but it is still important to be aware that the role of style in these matters is always significant. Sarah Cardwell argues for “recognition that the field needs more textual criticism and a stronger understanding of what ‘close textual analysis’ means, where the latter is understood to focus on thematic, formal and stylistic elements rather than simply on content or ‘representation’”⁸⁴. This research concurs with Bignell’s and Cardwell’s assertions, and would argue further that previous attempts to analyse ‘representation’ without due consideration of a programme’s thematic, formal and stylistic elements are likely to have been incomplete articulations at best.

Sarah Cardwell articulates an argument that is made to varying degrees by each of the critics that operate in or around the field of television aesthetics and who utilise expressive criticism as an approach;

⁸² Jonathan Bignell, ‘The Police Series’ in John Gibbs and Douglas Pye (eds.), *Close-Up 03* (London; New York: Wallflower, 2009) p. 64.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁴ Cardwell, ‘Television Aesthetics’, p. 72.

The lack of close analysis in the field has permitted work that is often derivative, unadventurous and under- or unsubstantiated to dominate. Scholars have strayed from an understanding that the most responsive and persuasive theorising arises from careful observations of the particularities of television texts. One of the objectives of this chapter is to demonstrate (in a necessarily limited fashion) how the methodology of close textual analysis can enhance television studies, by focusing specifically on aesthetic matters.⁸⁵

When dealing with questions of representation, there are good reasons to prefer an expressive approach to other forms of textual analysis. Traditional expressive criticism took as open an approach as possible to all elements of the text, in order to fully encapsulate the achievement of the director, yet questions of representation also benefit from this approach for the reason that representational matters are influenced by exactly the same complex web of interrelated techniques and devices. To bracket off questions of representation to only the narrative structure, or only the construction of character is to ignore all the other areas of aesthetic design that can influence how a particular sequence, scene or shot is experienced.

Following the example set by Karen Lury in her guide to television interpretation, my analysis focuses on four main areas – image, space, time and sound⁸⁶. Within these headings there is particular emphasis on style and its component parts, including mise-en-scene, camera movement, editing and performance style, as well as the narrative organisation of each case study and its relation to character. While all of these aspects of the text have been considered in relation to each series, they are not given equal weight in each chapter. Rather the relative emphasis placed on a particular aspect of the formal construction of each case study is a reflection of the differences existing between each series and the necessity of analysing them on their own terms within the expressive criticism framework. This too mirrors Lury's attitude that,

⁸⁵ Sarah Cardwell, 'Television Aesthetics and Close Analysis: Style, Mood and Engagement in *Perfect Strangers*' in Gibbs and Pye (eds.), *Style and Meaning*, p. 179.

⁸⁶ Karen Lury, *Interpreting Television* (London: Hodder Arnold; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 2-5.

“While my analyses are informed by my reading of other writers, some of whom are referred to directly, I do not adopt one theoretical framework. For better or worse, my approach mirrors the activity of television, since it is, in some sense, parasitic on other disciplines, drawing on aspects of film studies, sociology, aesthetics and communication studies”⁸⁷.

This research is not as broad or comprehensive in its scope as Lury’s (whose book is an attempt to account for the interpretation of every type of television programming) but it progresses along similar lines. The same could be said for Bignell, whose approach closely mirrors this research in many of its most basic principles;

The core content in each chapter consists of detailed analysis of selected sequences from episodes of the featured programme in that chapter. These detailed analyses seek to critically explore the choices made in such aspects of style as camera movement, framing and composition; editing and sequence structure; colour and lighting; performance and characterisation; music, sound and the delivery of dialogue; properties and set decoration; location and the aesthetic significance of urban space. The sequences chosen for analysis aim to be on one hand representative of the predominant visual styles of the series concerned, but also clear and interesting examples that connect to larger critical issues in the study of television dramatic fiction⁸⁸.

Like Bignell, one of the goals of this research is to construct a methodology that addresses traditional and accepted areas of television studies investigation like representation, but to do so in a way that places particular emphasis on the overlooked area of style, using expressive criticism as the primary approach. Partly this is due to a desire to demonstrate that expressive criticism need not invariably be accompanied by aesthetic evaluation, but mostly it is because it represents the best option for keeping a handle on the swirl of contradictions, ambiguities and

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 1.

⁸⁸ Bignell, *The Police Series*, p. 5.

uncertainties contained within the case studies. Close attention to style should not be considered a fringe activity or one that invariably involves unsophisticated appeals to some anomalous aesthetic ideal, but a standard part of textual analysis that is an absolute necessity when considering how different formal features influence questions of representation, regardless of the subject.

One further issue needs to be briefly addressed. Although this research is not concerned with the question of evaluation, there are still issues that arise from the use of expressive criticism that require a degree of clarification. Unlike other approaches to textual analysis like narrative theory and cognitive theory, expressive criticism does not make any significant attempt to establish an objective or empirical dimension to its methodology. While scholars focus on the same integral components of composition, the way in which this is done is to a large extent motivated by the subjectivity of the individual critic. Within this research the focus on close textual analysis has been limited to the representation of prohibition within each series, particularly as it relates to the centrifugal/centripetal narrative organisation. While this area of focus limits the scope of the analysis being carried out, it still leaves far more content than could feasibly be covered in the space available. This being the case, the challenge facing the author is to decide upon which aspects of each case study's representation of prohibition to focus on in order to emphasise those areas that seem most relevant in answering the research questions. Particularly as it relates to style, this process invariably becomes a matter of subjective interpretation, not only in relation to what scenes or shots to emphasise, but also in the analysis of those scenes and/or shots. As Gibbs and Pye write, "the position that underpins many of the contributions to this volume is that to be concerned with film style and its significance is inevitably to be involved in interpretation"⁸⁹. This interpretive activity, while not always acknowledged, is always part of textual analysis, even when it draws on approaches intended to constrain the subjectivity of the critics as much as possible.

⁸⁹ Gibbs and Pye, 'Introduction', p. 2.

Interpretation is not just a matter of imposing a particular top-down hermeneutic onto the text (as in David Bordwell's understanding of the term⁹⁰), but an inevitable part of any attempt to describe its content. Gibbs and Pye aver that;

While we can strive for objective recognition of, say, the action and the spatial and temporal dimensions of a shot, no description can be exhaustive and any description of the interaction of elements that make up even a simple shot will inevitably embody a viewpoint, a way of grading the elements we observe in their relationships with each other to register what we understand their priority to be. Description is inextricably bound up with interpretation.⁹¹

Even with scenes or shots that seem straightforward, there will always be aspects of the composition that strike different viewers as more significant than others. The consequence of this is that, to quote V. F. Perkins,

No intra-textual interpretation ever is or could be a proof. Most often, it is a description of aspects of the film with suggested understandings of some of the ways they are patterned. Rhetoric is involved in developing the description so that it evokes a sense of how, seen this way, the film may affect us, or so that it invites participation in the pleasure of discovering this way in which various of the film's features hang together. But the ultimate appeal for conviction is to the reader's memory and renewed experience of the film.⁹²

This perspective is applicable whether the interpretation is one that involves an evaluative element or not. As Mittell writes of evaluation,

⁹⁰ See David Bordwell, *Making Meaning: Inference and Rhetoric in the Interpretation of Cinema* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁹¹ Gibbs and Pye, 'Introduction', p. 4.

⁹² V. F. Perkins, 'Must We Say What They Mean? Film Criticism and Interpretation', *Movie* 34:5 (1990), p. 4.

Even more than other types of analysis, evaluation is an invitation to a dialogue, as debating the merits of cultural works is one of the most enjoyable ways we engage with texts, establish relationships with other consumers, and gain fresh respect for other people's opinions and insights.⁹³

While this research seeks to be explicit and detailed in outlining the parameters of the analysis being undertaken and the reasoning behind them, it nevertheless remains a work of interpretation, albeit of a representational rather than evaluative nature. Although the degree of attention and detail provided in the case study chapters is intended to demonstrate a sound basis for the analysis being undertaken, these can in no way be considered proofs. Rather they are interpretations made in relation to specific areas of analysis regarding the representation of prohibition, the influence of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum, and the stylistic properties that influence the understanding of these issues. While the analysis provided may convince the reader of its applicability or accuracy, at the most fundamental level these questions can only be adequately assessed through further engagement with the text and further debate within the discipline. As Gibbs and Pye summarise, "the answer again is to insist on criticism as implicit dialogue, inherently requiring not just assent but question, and also to insist that it is dialogue about a text or texts that I also have access to and the meanings of which I can contest"⁹⁴.

Narrative Theory and Cognitive Theory

While expressive criticism forms the basis of the methodology being utilised in this research, there are other approaches to the text that influence the analysis being undertaken in the following chapters. The first of these is narrative theory. Narrative theory originated in the study of literature and is typically traced back to the influence of the Russian Formalists in the 1920s,

⁹³ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 207.

⁹⁴ Gibbs and Pye, 'Introduction', p. 6.

and particularly the work of Vladimir Propp analysing the underlying structures of fairy tales⁹⁵. The incorporation of this work into film studies was a somewhat complicated one, but the work of Seymour Chatman and David Bordwell was particularly influential⁹⁶. Regarding the principles undergirding narrative theory, Chatman wrote,

Structuralist theory argues that each narrative has two parts: a story (*histoire*), the content or chain of events (actions, happenings), plus what may be called the existents (characters, items of setting); and a discourse (*discours*), that is, the expression, the means by which the content is communicated. In simple terms, the story is the *what* in a narrative that is depicted, discourse the *how*.⁹⁷

Bordwell made a different distinction focusing on the terms of fabula (story) and syuzhet (plot) to distinguish the difference between the story being told and the way in which that story is arranged and presented. As Bordwell puts it, “in the fiction film, narration is the process whereby the film’s syuzhet and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the fabula”⁹⁸. While these and other studies carved out a position for narrative theory in film studies, the incorporation of narrative theory into television studies has been more uncertain and, as Mittell writes, “analyses of conventional television narration are surprisingly limited”⁹⁹.

While there are aspects of this research that engage with questions of narrative organisation and structure, the desire to incorporate issues of style and representation alongside the analysis of narrative mitigated against an approach that relied too heavily on narrative theory. While a number of critics have made attempts to further develop narrative theory in relation to

⁹⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, trans. Laurence Scott (1928. 2nd Ed., Austin; London: University of Texas Press, 1968).

⁹⁶ See also, Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (London: Routledge, 1992); Greg M. Smith, *Film Structure and the Emotion System* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003);

⁹⁷ Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1978), p. 19.

⁹⁸ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (1985. Reprint, London: Routledge, 1995), p. 53.

⁹⁹ Mittell, ‘Narrative Complexity’, p. 30.

television, most of this work has focused on more widespread narrative forms, most typically the series-serial hybrid¹⁰⁰. As Porter, Larson, Harthcock and Nellis write, “even though television narratives are as linear as many novels, they exhibit several qualities that distinguish them from other forms of narration – notably a heavy emphasis on character development and continuous storylines that flow between episodes of a series”¹⁰¹. This work has clearly had an influence on Mittell’s own formulation of narrative complexity, although Mittell’s approach forgoes the kind of schematic deconstruction found in more conventional narrative theory. Part of the difficulty in adapting cinematic narratology to the study of television is the scale of the text that the analyst has to work with – something that has posed significant challenges in relation to the series/serial hybrid, and which is exacerbated in relation to fully-serialised immense texts like the case studies. Following Mittell’s example, this thesis avoids overt incorporation of aspects of narrative theory into the analysis of the case studies, while acknowledging that the approach merits further development in relation to television generally, and the study of fully-serialised drama series in particular.

The other approach to textual analysis with which this research engages is cognitive poetics, which incorporates a range of scholarship from different disciplines, such as philosophy and cognitive psychology, in order to try and account for how viewers engage with texts. As Mittell outlines,

According to this model, we can best understand the process of viewing (or reading literature) by drawing on our knowledge of cognition and perception and then positing how the formal elements in a text might be experienced by such a viewer – while

¹⁰⁰ See Michael J. Porter et al, ‘Re(de)fining Narrative Events: Examining Television Narrative Structure’, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 30:1 (2002), pp. 23-30; Michael Z. Newman, ‘From Beats to Arcs: Towards a Poetics of Television Narrative’, *The Velvet Light Trap* Number 58 (Fall 2006), pp. 16-28; Sarah Kozloff, ‘Narrative Theory and Television’ in Robert C. Allen (ed.), *Channels of Discourse, Reassembled 2nd edition* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 61-100.

¹⁰¹ Porter et al, ‘Re(de)fining Narrative Events’, p. 24.

viewers are not reduced to their mental mechanics, the insights of cognitive psychology inform how we imagine the possible ways that viewers engage with film or television.¹⁰²

The basic principles of this approach can be traced back to the constructivist cognitive account of viewer activity that Bordwell offers in *Narration in the Fiction Film* – a theory that granted the audience a greater degree of agency in the comprehension of film than many competing theories, particularly those associated with psychoanalysis. Indeed, the development of cognitivism within film studies was to a large extent a reaction against the plethora of theoretical approaches that assumed an essential passivity on the part of the audience¹⁰³.

While the body of scholarship produced by this research has been of undeniable utility to film studies as a whole, there are still issues with the approach that present potential problems in relation to its application to television. Much of the empirical research that film cognitivism draws on is derived from experiments that study small sections of films, rather than the entire narrative. Many cognitivists would argue that since cognitive theory deals with the most basic aspects of human comprehension, this selectivity is an acceptable compromise to make in the name of practicality. Corralling research subjects to watch small extracts of film is an easier proposition than doing so for a full feature-length film. This applies even more obviously in relation to television, where series like the case studies often require over 50 hours of viewing to experience in their entirety. While Greg M. Smith notes that “serial television is certainly approachable from a cognitivist perspective”¹⁰⁴, he goes on to note that it remains a tricky proposition. Smith acknowledges that,

The difficulty for empirical cognitivists is to find enough experimental subjects with a range of involvements to allow the researcher to make statistically significant

¹⁰² Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 6.

¹⁰³ See David Bordwell and Noel Carroll (eds.), *Post-Theory: Reconstructing Film Studies*; David Bordwell, ‘A Case for Cognitivism’, *Iris*, 9 (1989), pp. 11–40; David Bordwell, ‘A Case for Cognitivism: Further Reflections’, *Iris*, 11 (1990), pp. 107–112.

¹⁰⁴ Greg M. Smith, ‘Coming Out of the Corner: The Challenges of a Broader Media Cognitivism’ in Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (eds.), *Cognitive Media Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 291.

explanations of expert and non-expert viewing. The difficulty for non-empirical cognitivists is that television viewing is such a different process for novice and well-versed viewers; it is almost like studying different texts.¹⁰⁵

These issues clearly pose some challenges for a more elaborated cognitive theory of television, but as Mittell's work demonstrates, there are strong arguments for making the attempt. Of particular relevance to the study of the kind of television addressed in this research is cognitive-derived scholarship relating to character and particularly the experience of viewers engaging with antiheroic characters in long-form fiction (discussed in detail in the following section).

Despite utilising critical concepts derived from scholarship that has an explicitly cognitive component, this research does not attempt to construct a primarily cognitive methodology. Partly this is due to the limited scholarship relating to cognitivism in television studies, but also because those works which have attempted close textual analysis within the cognitive tradition have struggled with issues of style and the interpretive activity that inevitably results from the consideration of representation. Jacobs and Peacock note that even though Mittell is one of the more strident and visible advocates of television evaluation, the scholarship that he produces in this vein overwhelmingly eschews questions of style in favour of more conventional cognitivist interests, particularly narrative design¹⁰⁶. This is also true of the chapter on evaluation in *Complex TV* – Mittell's analysis of character and narrative design is highly insightful, and provides the template which this research is committed to developing, but the treatment of style throughout the chapter and book remains somewhat underdeveloped. While cognitive theory can address questions of style, the need to account for the interplay between narrative organisation, character alignment, style and representation makes such a project an unwieldy proposition. However, while not forming the main methodological basis for this research, scholarship derived from cognitive theory still plays a significant part in the analysis to follow.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

¹⁰⁶ Jacobs and Peacock, 'Introduction', p. 3-5.

Rewatching and Moments

Various scholars have considered how DVD, DVR, On-Demand and Internet Streaming services have resulted in the ‘binge-watching’ of television and how this experience differs from that of broadcast viewing¹⁰⁷. What often escapes consideration in these accounts is how the availability and accessibility of an entire series not only apparently encourages sustained sessions of consumption, but also encourages the audience to return to a series they have already seen. Mittell has established a good starting model for the practice by describing what he calls “the three prime motivations for rewatching – analytic, emotional, and social”¹⁰⁸. Analytic rewatching involves the practices that Hills outlines when considering the popularity of DVDs with academics and fans – returning to a favoured text for a close reading that examines the text with a critical eye, attempting to parse its mysteries. While obviously a prevalent practice in academia, Mittell highlights how “the narrative paratexts that have emerged on DVDs, such as director commentaries and making-of documentaries, formalize the analytic rewatch, as you are literally guided through the text by an expert companion”¹⁰⁹. He also connects this form of rewatching to his work on narrative complexity, writing that “such hermeneutic impulses are explicitly encouraged by many contemporary television serials, as they foreground the operational aesthetic of marvelling at a show’s complex storytelling mechanics alongside the forward drive of the plot”¹¹⁰. An aspect of analytic rewatching that Mittell also identifies is one that features prominently in the case studies ahead, namely that rewatching creates the opportunity for aesthetic reappraisal. Mittell relates how his appreciation for the first season of

¹⁰⁷ Lotz, *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*; Brunsdon, ‘Bingeing on Box-Sets’; James Bennett and Tom Brown (eds.), *Film and Television After DVD* (London; New York: Routledge, 2008); Matt Hills, ‘From the Box in the Corner to the Box on the Shelf’, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, 5:1 (April 2007), pp. 41-60; Derek Kompare, ‘Publishing Flow: DVD Box Sets and the Reconception of Television’, *Television and New Media* 7:4 (November 2006), pp. 335-360.

¹⁰⁸ Jason Mittell, ‘Notes on Rewatching’, *Just TV* (27 January 2011), <<http://justtv.wordpress.com/2011/01/27/notes-on-rewatching/>>.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

Breaking Bad significantly increased when he rewatched it after seeing the second and third seasons, which helped give the first season a greater depth and insight than he had initially perceived. Hills suggests that the ease of rewatching is an important facilitator of close reading and textual analysis, and is part of the explanation for the recent expansion of scholarly interest in television aesthetics. Both Hills and Caldwell argue that by bracketing off individual series and giving them the same kind of extra features regularly found on film DVDs, the format legitimises individual series as aesthetic objects and encourage appreciation of them along those lines¹¹¹.

However, it is necessary to briefly outline two aspects of textual analysis that will be significant features of each of the case studies but are still somewhat underdeveloped within television studies. The first is from Hills, who argues that the notion of the textual ‘moment’ is an unfortunately overlooked area in television studies criticism¹¹². Hills writes that “TV studies has surely had rather too little to say, in the past, about fragmentary textual moments, or about great moments, having typically confined itself to value ascriptions at the level of ‘the text’ or in relation to the medium of TV itself”¹¹³. While Hills is mainly interested in analysing moments that have already been pre-selected by fan communities, he also praises the work of Sue Turnbull and her discussion of ‘ekphrasis’, which she describes as “an endeavour to describe and to recover in language the effect which a particular performance, moment or TV series may have had on us”¹¹⁴. Turnbull’s article consists of her describing the myriad factors that coalesce into the intense emotion she experienced when first sighting the character of Spike on *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (The WB, 1997-2001 and UPN, 2001-2003). The focus on the ‘moment’ means

¹¹¹ Hills, ‘Box in the Corner’; John Thornton Caldwell, ‘Prefiguring DVD Bonus Tracks: Making-ofs and Behind-the-Scenes as Historic Television Programming Strategies Prototypes’ in Bennett and Brown (eds.), *Film and Television After DVD*, pp. 149-171.

¹¹² Matt Hills, ‘The Dispersible Television Text: Theorising Moments of the New *Doctor Who*’, *Science Fiction Film and Television*, 1:1 (Spring 2008), pp. 25-44.

¹¹³ Matt Hills, ‘Television Aesthetic: A Pre-Structuralist Danger?’, *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 8:1 (April 2011), p. 109.

¹¹⁴ Sue Turnbull, ‘Moments of Inspiration: Performing Spike’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 8:3 (August 2005), p. 368.

that her analysis is self-consciously personal and particular to her experience of the series, which is why Hills is apparently untroubled by concerns about canon-building or ‘traditional aesthetic discourse’. Both Turnbull and Hills observe that the articulation and analysis of these kinds of “affecting and affective moments”¹¹⁵ has found a comfortable home in film studies, but is largely absent from television studies.

The truth of this can be seen in a recent book, *Film Moments*, in which Tom Brown and James Walters write that,

Whether it is to illustrate a wider aesthetic, conceptual or historical point, or whether it is for the purpose of uncovering the complex layers of meaning operating within an individual film, a concentration on the film moment is in fact central to many different traditions of investigation into film.¹¹⁶

This approach seems particularly valuable in relation to fully-serialised immense texts, since focusing on a moment is not just about the close textual analysis of the properties contained in a particular shot or scene, but also requires a full and extensive explanation of how the cumulative weight of narrative, character, mise-en-scène and other factors contribute to it. Jacobs and Peacock argue that “in order to negotiate the potential complexities and meanings of style, individual moments within television series merit closer study”¹¹⁷. Moments have value because they demand that attention be paid to the totality of the viewing experience and the fact that with television viewing there are often complex webs of memory and familiarity that influence how a particular moment is experienced. Moreover, because fully-serialised immense texts will always contain far more material than can be described within a written account, any close textual analysis undertaken will need to be both representative of tendencies within the text as a whole,

¹¹⁵ Hills, ‘The Dispersible Television Text’, p. 42.

¹¹⁶ Tom Brown and James Walters, *Film Moments: Criticism, History, Theory*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan/BFI, 2010), p. xi.

¹¹⁷ Jacobs and Peacock, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

but also specific in terms of the position of the moment within the larger narrative and web of character interactions. This is somewhat a matter of degrees – scholars have always isolated particular scenes or shots from the larger text in order to illustrate their arguments, although often this is done in service of a particular formal feature or technique. The approach to ‘moments’ in this research is much broader and is intended as an acknowledgement that the meaning of a given scene is never solely dictated by one aspect of its construction, but is a constantly shifting range of emphases that all exist in relation to one another. As Klevan writes, “honing in on moments is a method of magnification. We can survey the interweaving contours of the drama and better discern the undulating lines without needing to straighten them out”¹¹⁸. Thus the moments approach helps manage the challenge of analysing many dozens of hours of content, while still facilitating the multifaceted close reading approach of expressive criticism. Particularly in relation to representational issues that appear ambiguous or nebulous, the moments approach helps to keep analysis focused on specific examples, while also indicating the various ways those examples could be understood in relation to the representational questions at hand.

Serial Narrative and Character

Since the earliest days that the quality television paradigm has been relevant, one of the most frequently identified hallmarks of the form has been the way in which the standard episodic structure of the series has gradually been fused with the on-going serial narration typically associated with the soap opera¹¹⁹. Sarah Kozloff outlines the basic distinction between the two narrative forms as follows;

¹¹⁸ Andrew Klevan, ‘Notes on Teaching Film Style’ in Gibbs and Pye (eds.), *Style and Meaning*, p. 215.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition*; Glen Creeber, *Serial Television: Big Drama on the Small Screen* (London: British Film Institute, 2004); Michael Z. Newman, ‘From Beats to Arcs’; Sconce, ‘What If?’; Sean

Series refers to those shows whose characteristics and setting are recycled, but the story concludes in each individual episode. By contrast, in a *serial* the story and discourse do not come to a conclusion during an episode, and the threads are picked up again after an hiatus. A series is thus similar to an anthology of short stories, while a serial is like a serialised Victorian novel. Serials can be further divided into those that do eventually end (despite the misnomer, miniseries belong in this category) and those, such as soap opera, that may be cancelled but never reach a conclusion.¹²⁰

The success of prime-time soap operas like *Dallas* and *Dynasty* acted as more popular precursors to series like *Hill Street Blues*¹²¹, which not only integrated serial narration into its structure, but also developed the kind of multiple interweaving plot lines that Robin Nelson would come to define as ‘flexi-narrative’¹²². As Nelson writes, the benefit of this new narrative form was that it “maximises the pleasures of both regular viewers who watch from week to week and get hooked by the serial narratives and the occasional viewers who happen to tune into one episode seeking the satisfaction of narrative closure within that episode”¹²³. This hybrid of episodic and serial narration remained relatively uncommon throughout the 1980s, before finding greater prevalence and increased scholarly attention in the 1990s, the period that Mittell marks as the starting point in his analysis of narrative complexity.

Although the merger of episodic and serial narrative forms had previously been identified by television scholars, Mittell’s articulation of narrative complexity has been the most cited.

Mittell writes that,

O’Sullivan, ‘Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season’, *StoryWorlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies* 2.1 (2010), pp. 59-77.

¹²⁰ Kozloff, ‘Narrative Theory and Television’, p. 90-91.

¹²¹ For more see, Thompson, *Television’s Second Golden Age*, pp. 59-74; Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr and Tise Vahimagi (eds.), *MTM - ‘Quality Television’* (London: British Film Institute, 1984).

¹²² Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition*.

¹²³ Robin Nelson, ‘Analysing TV Fiction: How to Study Television Drama’ in Glen Creeber (ed.), *Tele-Visions: An Introduction to Studying Television* (London: BFI, 2006), p. 82.

At its most basic level, narrative complexity is a redefinition of episodic forms under the influence of serial narration – not necessarily a complete merger of episodic and serial forms but a shifting balance. Rejecting the need for plot closure within every episode that typifies conventional episodic form, narrative complexity foregrounds ongoing stories across a range of genres.¹²⁴

This hybrid of episodic and serial forms is now the dominant mode of storytelling in American television fiction, as it balances the accessibility of single-episode plotlines with the satisfaction of long-term story and character arcs. Mittell argues that this change was motivated by changes in the television industry, particularly the proliferation of channels for which attracting small but loyal audiences became a viable approach for economic success. Previously, as Mittell notes, “traditional industry logic dictated that audiences lacked the weekly consistency to allow for serialised narratives, and the pressures of syndication favoured interchangeable episodes of conventional sitcoms and procedural dramas”¹²⁵. The growth of consumer technologies that give the audience greater flexibility over the televisual text are also heavily influential for Mittell, who argues that “time-shifting technologies like VCRs and digital video recorders enable viewers to choose when they want to watch a program, but, more important for narrative construction, viewers can rewatch episodes or segments to parse out complex moments”¹²⁶. These industrial and technological influences form the basis of Mittell’s articulation of the specific narrative pleasures to be found in narratively complex shows, including the use of flashbacks, flash-forwards, memories, alternate perspectives and other such examples of narrative trickery. For attentive, engaged viewers such narrative pyrotechnics can produce moments where the audience is invited to marvel at the ‘operational aesthetic’ – an awareness of

¹²⁴ Mittell, ‘Narrative Complexity’, p. 32.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 31.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

the hand of the creators within the story brilliantly bringing together various narrative threads and “asking us to marvel at how the writers pulled it off”¹²⁷.

While Mittell’s account of narrative complexity examined a number of ways in which seriality has impacted the experience of viewing television fiction, the vast majority of the examples he cites are what might be considered examples of conventional narrative complexity, in which a balance is struck between the weekly resolutions of episodic plots, contained within longer serialised story arcs. While seriality has become commonplace in American television, outside of the soap operas the number of series that are fully serialised remains fairly small and they are overwhelmingly found on subscription or boutique cable channels, although they are also emerging as part of the original content created by online streaming services like Netflix and Amazon Prime. Perhaps due to the relative paucity of examples, there has been very little consideration of the differences that exist between series that employ a conventional series-serial hybrid narrative, and those that are fully-serialised and draw their story arcs across multiple seasons. In his work on serial television, Creeber outlines “the basic structures of television drama that have traditionally existed”¹²⁸, which he names as the *Single Play*, *Made-for-TV Movie*, *Soap Opera*, *Series*, *Anthology Series*, *Serial* and *Miniseries*¹²⁹. Creeber makes it clear that, at least at the time he was writing, there was no real expectation that a fully-serialised drama series would continue unabated across multiple seasons and many dozens of hours of screen time.

It is for this reason that this research adopts the term ‘immense’ to describe the type of television series being analysed. Immensity in this context is not merely an acknowledgement of the time required to watch the entire show, since in many cases the typical 13-episode prestige drama season is less of a time commitment than a 22-episode order of a more conventional network series-serial hybrid. This difference has been noted by Sean O’Sullivan, who claims that “the

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

¹²⁸ Creeber, *Serial Television*, p. 7.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

thirteen-episode uninterrupted complete season provided, for the first time in American television history, a distinct narrative form, one that was large enough to occupy significant time and space, but not so large as to turn into vague sprawl”¹³⁰. This may overstate the case somewhat, but it nevertheless demonstrates that scholars are increasingly attempting to move forward from the broad categorisation of narrative complexity to try to identify more specific narrative forms within the larger definition. Fully serialised immense series do not involve the same kind of episodic resolution of series-serial hybrids, and thus they offer almost no viable entry point for new viewers other than the beginning, so at least in terms of casual viewers, they offer a viewing experience that is distinct from hybrid series. To a certain extent the use of ‘immense’ can be compared to Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin’s notion of textual ‘vastness’¹³¹ – a concept they apply to a wide range of different media, but which clearly involves the kind of heavily serialised television addressed in this thesis.

David Lavery has also contributed to the discussion, noting that there is a meaningful distinction to be made between programmes like those Creeber terms serials (usually only a few episodes in duration, and much more typical of British television than American), and what Lavery calls “long-term television narrative (hereafter LTTVN)”¹³². However, while Lavery acknowledges that the scale of such series makes them worth considering as a specific category of television, he does not distinguish between degrees of seriality, grouping fully-serialised shows like *The Wire* and *Deadwood* with more conventionally narratively complex series like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (WB, 1997-2003) and *The X-Files* (FOX, 1993-2002), which feature both longer serialised arcs and stand-alone episodes¹³³. The same is true of Angela Ndalani’s

¹³⁰ Sean O’Sullivan, ‘Broken on Purpose’, p. 68. See also, Sean O’Sullivan, ‘Reconnoitering the Rim: Thoughts on *Deadwood* and Third Seasons’ in Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (eds.), *Third Person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 323-332; Sean O’Sullivan, ‘Old, New, Borrowed, Blue: *Deadwood* and Serial Fiction’ in David Lavery (ed.) *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), pp. 115-129.

¹³¹ Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin, *Third Person*, p. 1.

¹³² David Lavery, ‘Lost and Long-Term Television Narrative’ in Harrigan and Wardrip-Fruin (eds.), *Third Person*, p.

313

¹³³ Ibid.

analysis of the neo-baroque properties of serialised television, in which she writes of series including *The Sopranos*, *Six Feet Under* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, “they are series as serial, in that throughout the entire series the viewer becomes embroiled in the changing lives and stories of multiple characters. These series therefore retain a sense of historicity and progress through the focus on characters that develop from episode to episode”¹³⁴. Once more there is clear awareness that the expansion of seriality is highly significant to the organisation of television programmes, without a distinction being drawn between different degrees of seriality¹³⁵. The use of ‘fully-serialised immense text’ is intended to function as a subheading of narrative complex television, specifically delineating those series which are essentially multi-season serials in which episodic narrative closure is almost entirely absent.

Although Mittell does not explicitly identify fully-serialised immense series as a distinct narrative form, his articulation of the difference between centrifugal and centripetal narrative complexity is fundamental to this research, as it is the most substantial account to suggest that a meaningful distinction exists between fully-serialised series and series-serial hybrids. Mittell writes that despite their many similarities in other areas, when it comes to the nature of their storytelling approaches, *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* “point to two distinct modes of narrative complexity”¹³⁶. Mittell outlines the two modes of serial narration as follows;

The Wire embraces what we might call centrifugal complexity, where the ongoing narrative pushes outward, spreading characters across an expanding storyworld. On a centrifugal programme, there is no clear narrative centre, as the central action is about what happens between characters and institutions as they spread outward. It is not just that the show expands in quantity of characters and settings, but that its richness is found

¹³⁴ Anglea Ndalianis, ‘Television and the Neo-Baroque’ in Michael Hammond and Lucy Mazdon (eds.), *The Contemporary Television Series* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, c2005), p. 96.

¹³⁵ Newman and Levine posit that there is often hesitancy on the part of television critics and creators to emphasise the importance of serial narration, for fear that it might draw to close a comparison between the highly-legitimated form of prestige television, and culturally devalued form of the soap opera. See Newman and Levine, *Legitimizing Television*, pp. 80-99.

¹³⁶ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 222.

in the complex web of interconnectivity forged across the social system rather than in the depth of any one individual's role in the narrative or psychological layers.¹³⁷

Mittel acknowledges that such a categorisation is not meant to imply that characterisation in centrifugally complex shows is inherently lacking, but merely that the primary focus is on the breadth of perspectives and characters featured. He contrasts this with *Breaking Bad*, writing that,

If *The Wire* is all about broad systematic vastness, *Breaking Bad* exemplifies a model of dense television, embracing centripetal complexity where the narrative movement pulls the actions and characters inward toward a more cohesive centre, establishing a thickness of backstory and character depth that drives the action. The effect is to create a storyworld with unmatched depth of characterisation, layers of backstory and psychological complexity building upon viewer experience and memories over its numerous seasons.¹³⁸

In both cases what is fundamental to Mittell's understanding of the differences between the two forms is the way in which each organises its characters, and the degree to which the audience is given access to those characters.

Mittell argues that the centrifugal narrative of *The Wire* means that it offers a near-unrivalled scale in terms of the number of named characters and the various institutions to which they are attached, but this comes at some cost in terms of psychological depth. He writes that,

The Wire's emphasis on the vastness of Baltimore's interlocking institutions and inhabitants necessitates that it sacrifices character depth to achieve such breadth.

Characters on *The Wire* are certainly multi-dimensional and quite nuanced human beings, but they are defined primarily by their relationships to larger institutions... the

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Ibid., p. 222-223.

series rarely focuses on the characters' interior lives or nuanced relationships with each other.¹³⁹

Conversely, Mittell defines *Breaking Bad*'s centripetal narration as a rejection of "vast sociological breadth for an inward-looking psychological depth"¹⁴⁰, evidenced by the relatively small group of central characters that remain the focus of the narrative across the entire scope of the series. "The effect", Mittell argues, "is to create a storyworld with unmatched depth of characterization, layers of backstory, and psychological complexity building on viewers' experiences and memories over the program's numerous seasons"¹⁴¹. What is apparent from these descriptions is that the question of whether a particular fully-serialised programme should be designated as possessing either a centrifugal or centripetal narrative structure is largely defined by how it deals with character.

Character

Work on television character has been fairly limited, and much of what currently exists is concerned with producing more general accounts that, while still instructive, pose some issues when considering characters in fully-serialised series¹⁴². As Roberta Pearson observes,

Seriality is American television drama's defining characteristic, distinguishing it from both films and video games. The requirement that television characters sustain a series distinguishes them from their counterparts in psychologically realist cinema. The core psychological traits and behaviours of film characters can alter as they experience the narrative trajectories that bring them to the denouement... The lack of an immediate

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 220.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 223.

¹⁴² See, Greg M. Smith, 'A Case of Cold Feet: Serial Narration and the Character Arc', *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 3.1 (2006), pp. 82-94; Roberta Pearson, 'Chain of Events: Regimes of Evaluation and *Lost*'s Construction of the Televisual Character' in Roberta Pearson (ed.), *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a Hit Television Show* (London; New York: I. B. Tauris, 2009), pp. 139-158.

denouement requires that the core psychological traits and behaviours of television characters remain stable.¹⁴³

Particularly in the case of narratively complex shows that balance episodic and serial narrative elements (such as *CSI*, the focus of Pearson's analysis), significant character change would be undesirable and disrupt the balance between the core characters. Pearson argues that,

Characters are suited to their particular fictional forms. Protagonists of one-off novels, plays or films may complete teleological trajectories to life-changing epiphanies. The central protagonists of television dramas must perforce exhibit relative stability in keeping with the repetitive nature of the series/serial format.¹⁴⁴

Pearson goes on to state that "over the course of a long-running series, the routine augmenting of traits and biographies for novelty purposes can lead to highly elaborated characters. But a highly elaborated character is not the same as a well-developed character"¹⁴⁵. For the vast majority of television series, "it's more accurate to talk about character accumulation and depth than it is to talk about character development"¹⁴⁶.

In acknowledgement of Pearson's analysis, Mittell develops five categories of character change that are of value to the analysis being carried out in this research, as they help to specify the critical language being utilised. Mittell's five categories are as follows: character elaboration, character growth, character education, character overhaul, and character transformation¹⁴⁷.

Character elaboration is the process described by Pearson, in which gradual revelations about character backstory or personality traits over the course of the season give the impression of development, even while keeping core characteristics the same. *Character growth* involves "the

¹⁴³ Roberta Pearson, 'Anatomizing Gilbert Grissom: The Structure and Function of the Televisual Character' in Michael Allen (ed.), *Reading 'CSI': Crime TV Under the Microscope* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), p. 49-50.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 55.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 56.

¹⁴⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, pp. 136-141.

process of maturation in which a character becomes more realized and fleshed out over time”¹⁴⁸, and which are often “contrasted with stable adults whose personalities and actions are much more static”¹⁴⁹. *Character education* involves the process wherein “a mature adult learns a key life lesson over the course of a series and ends up a changed person”¹⁵⁰. Mittell notes that “this type of character education is fairly common in long-form serials, as characters learn to accept their life’s situations, come to terms with their pasts, or develop skills and abilities that change their behaviour”¹⁵¹. *Character overhaul* is not relevant to this research, as it deals with abrupt changes in character motivated by supernatural or fantastic influences. However, the final category of *character transformation* is highly relevant to this research, as it is the version of character change that, according to Pearson, is most atypical in television fiction (and typically the preserve of literature, film and theatre). Mittell identifies the phenomenon as “a character transformation of an adult, complete with a gradual shift of morality, attitudes, and sense of self that manifests itself in altered actions and long-term repercussions”¹⁵². Each of these categories will be important in the analysis that follows in the case study chapters, especially as the fully-serialised nature of each series has significant influence on the applicability of each category, and important aspects of the representation of prohibition in each series rely on the precise understanding of each one.

Of central importance to the understanding of character in this research and in Mittell’s is the work of Murray Smith regarding cinematic characters and what Smith terms the ‘structure of sympathy’¹⁵³. The idea that audiences ‘identify’ with particular characters based on the aesthetic and narrative organisation of a given film has persisted for a long time in film studies, driven by

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 137.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 138.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid., p. 141.

¹⁵³ For more on the construction of cinematic character, see Jens Eder, ‘Understanding Characters’, *Projections* 4:1 (Summer 2010), pp. 16-40; Michael Z. Newman, *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, c2011); Michael Z. Newman, ‘Characterization as Social Cognition in *Welcome to the Dollhouse*’, *Film Studies: An International Review* 8 (Summer 2006), pp. 53-67.

psychoanalytic theories of viewership. Yet, as Smith outlines, this notion has been imprecisely applied in the literature, often with unwarranted certainty regarding particular filmmaking techniques, most notably the point-of-view shot which is often characterised as invariably causing the audience to ‘identify’ with the character whose perspective we are sharing¹⁵⁴. Rejecting this imprecise argument, Smith argues that “we need to break the notion down into a number of more precisely defined concepts: recognition, alignment, and allegiance. These concepts are, however, systematically related, together constituting what I term the *structure of sympathy*”¹⁵⁵.

In Smith’s formulation, recognition refers to “the spectator’s construction of character: the perception of a set of textual elements, in film typically cohering around the image of a body, as an individuated and continuous human agent”¹⁵⁶. Detective Jimmy McNulty is identifiable as a character throughout *The Wire* because he is always played by the actor Dominic West, using the same voice, and answering to the same name. While specific texts can frustrate or complicate this process, recognition is a generally straightforward process, which Smith notes is why it has so often been overlooked. Particular in terms of their usefulness for the purposes of criticism, the meaningful terminological difference to grasp is that between alignment and allegiance. Smith defines alignment as “the process by which spectators are placed in relation to the characters in terms of access to their actions, and to what they know and feel”¹⁵⁷. Within this definition he makes two further distinctions, which he describes as,

Two interlocking functions, *spatio-temporal attachment* and *subjective access*...

Attachment concerns the way in which the narration restricts itself to the actions of a single character, or moves freely among the spatio-temporal paths of two or more characters. Subjective access pertains to the degree of access we have to the subjectivity

¹⁵⁴ See Laura Mulvey, ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, *Screen* 16:3 (Autumn 1975), pp. 6-18.

¹⁵⁵ Smith, *Engaging Characters*, p. 73.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

of characters, a function which may vary from character to character within a narrative.¹⁵⁸

Just because the viewer attached to a particular character in the story, that fact does not necessarily determine how they are going to understand and relate to that character. And just because the viewer is tightly attached to a particular character does not necessarily mean that they are granted more access to their emotions, beliefs or feelings. While there is often a correlation between the two, it is not a necessary condition that they overlap. Or, to quote Smith, “attachment is that function of narration which renders characters as agents, entities that act and behave; subjective access is the function that represents characters as entities that desire, believe, feel, think, and so forth”¹⁵⁹.

The final aspect of the structure of sympathy is allegiance. Smith writes that,

Allegiance pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator. Here we are perhaps closest to what is meant by ‘identification’ in everyday usage... Allegiance depends upon the spectator having what she takes to be reliable access to the character’s state of mind, on understanding the context of the character’s actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge”.¹⁶⁰

Unlike theories of identification, Smith argues that alignment with a particular character does not have any inherent bearing on whether the audience will be inclined to sympathise with that character or not. Moreover, he clarifies that he does not,

Mean to imply that the spectator’s understanding and evaluation of the traits of a character must be either complete or immutable in order for allegiance to occur, but merely that at a given moment in the narrative the spectator must believe that she has

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 143.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 84.

some basis for evaluation, in the form of beliefs about what traits comprise the character in question”.¹⁶¹

Allegiance to particular characters can never be assumed to stay consistent, as the introduction of backstory or the revelation of particular, hitherto unsuspected personality traits may fundamentally alter the viewer’s evaluation of a character. While this may well be a consequence of the degree to which the audience is aligned with a particular character, this is not a prerequisite.

Smith’s structure of sympathy is particularly relevant in relation to the case studies being analysed in this research, as the distinction between alignment and allegiance is fundamental when considering how to interpret the representation of characters involved in a contentious and morally problematic milieu. Numerous scholars have identified a common kind of character that is prevalent in prestige dramas, including the case studies in this research. As Mittell writes;

One common trait shared by many complex television series is the narrative prominence of unsympathetic, morally questionable, or villainous figures, nearly always male... a trend typically identified as the character type of the antihero – a term that may not be applicable per traditional literary definitions but has become the common cultural moniker for this style of characterization”.¹⁶²

Particularly in the case of the central protagonists in *Boardwalk Empire* and *Breaking Bad*, the distinction between the audience’s alignment with antiheroic characters and the question of whether they are also allied with them is highly relevant¹⁶³. As noted further below, one issue that can arise when critics carry out ideological analyses of prohibition narratives is that characters become too simplistically identified as either villainous or virtuous, often because of

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 85.

¹⁶² Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 142.

¹⁶³ For more on the proliferation of television antiheroes see Brett Martin, *Difficult Men: Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: From The Sopranos and The Wire to Mad Men and Breaking Bad* (London: Faber and Faber, 2013); Amanda D. Lotz, *Cable Guys: Television and Masculinities in the 21st Century* (New York: NYU Press, 2014).

some assumption of audience ‘identification’ with particular characters. In antihero texts, the amount of time that the viewer spends aligned with unpleasant or transgressive characters might imply that the audience is intended to ‘identify’ with them. As Mittell writes, “an antihero is a character who is our primary point of ongoing narrative alignment but whose behaviour and beliefs provoke ambiguous, conflicted, or negative moral allegiance”¹⁶⁴. Thinking in terms of alignment and allegiance ensures that criticism draws clear distinctions between the time the viewer spends with a particular character, the intimacy of the access they are allowed to their subjective mental and emotional states, and the degree to which they are intended to be assessed as laudable or condemnable.

While the application of Smith’s structure of sympathy to television studies has been fairly limited, Smith and Noel Carroll have both considered its relevance in relation to the depiction of Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) in *The Sopranos*¹⁶⁵. In their respective articles the authors demonstrate how less nuanced approaches would struggle to fully comprehend the range of viewer responses that can be generated by an antiheroic character like Tony, and how the language provided by the structure of sympathy allows for greater nuance and insight. While both scholars take as their starting point the idea that audiences are favourably disposed towards Tony (very much not my experience of the series, but a widespread reaction according to Smith and Carroll), they also indicate how varied the range of responses can be to an antiheroic character that the audience is aligned with across an immense televisual text. Carroll notes that it is possible to be fascinated by a character like Tony, even while finding his behaviour repellent. Carroll goes on to argue that one of the key aspects of engendering audience alliance with a character like Tony Soprano is that his is, in the end, a fictional character and not bound by the same conditions governing normal existence. Carroll writes that,

¹⁶⁴ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 142.

¹⁶⁵ Murray Smith, ‘Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such An Appealing Murderer?’ in Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (eds.), *Ethics at the Cinema* (New York; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 66-90; Noel Carroll, ‘Sympathy for Soprano’ Chap. 15 in *Minerva’s Night Out: Philosophy, Pop Culture, and Moving Pictures* (Malden, MA; Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 234-246; See also, Margrethe Bruun Vaage, ‘Blinded by Familiarity’ in Ted Nannicelli and Paul Taberham (eds.), *Cognitive Media Theory*, pp. 286-284.

The alliance we strike is not with an actual gang lord, but with the fictional Tony Soprano, an inhabitant of a very unique fictional world... When we look at the moral structure of that fictional world, it seems to me that Tony is the most likely candidate or, at least, one of the likeliest candidates for an alliance, given the entire available array of characters as they are portrayed in the series.¹⁶⁶

Mittell also focuses on this idea, which he terms “*relative morality*, in which an ethically questionable character is juxtaposed with more explicitly villainous and unsympathetic characters to highlight the antihero’s more redeeming qualities”¹⁶⁷.

Murray Smith develops the idea even further by identifying several other types of potential allegiance that he considers viable responses to the prolonged experience of engaging with characters whose behaviour is often appalling or problematic. Referring to Tony’s murders of many of those people closest to him, Smith argues;

Our allegiance with Soprano might thus best be characterised as *partial* allegiance: we ally ourselves with some of his actions and attitudes and not others; indeed, some of his actions and attitudes draw our antipathy rather than sympathy... Moreover, to compound matters, a single action may draw out distinct and contrasting responses from us.¹⁶⁸

Smith expands his ideas even further by positing another category of allegiance that he calls ‘perverse allegiance’, where part of the viewer’s positive response to Tony (if they experience such an emotion) occurs precisely because he is able to transgress the legal, moral and social boundaries that govern everyday life, not in spite of it. Finally, Smith writes that “we can add here one more perspective. One might hold that the show principally elicits an *antipathy* towards Soprano; that it functions as an unambiguous moral fable detailing the corrosive effects of the

¹⁶⁶ Noel Carroll, ‘Sympathy for Soprano’, p. 241.

¹⁶⁷ Mittell, *Complex TV*, p. 143.

¹⁶⁸ Murray Smith, ‘Just What Is It That Makes Tony Soprano Such an Appealing, Attractive Murderer?’ in Ward E. Jones and Samantha Vice (eds.), *Ethics at the Cinema* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 86.

Mafia lifestyle”¹⁶⁹. At any particular moment in the series, any or all of these different responses might be in play for the individual viewer, and without close attention to the range of possibilities involved the analysis of any area of representation could be significantly distorted. These considerations are important in the analysis of any fictional characters, but in relation to the vast, evolving nature of the antiheroic characters of fully-serialised prestige television, it is particularly crucial.

Representation

This final section of the literature review is focused on the way in which prohibition is understood as a subject, both within analyses of film and television, and more broadly within a range of overlapping academic disciplines relevant to the understanding of the subject. Unlike the majority of published material on the representation of prohibition in film and television, this research is not preoccupied with ideological criticism aimed at demonstrating the distance between real-world conditions and their fictional representations. Instead the focus is on analysing how the varied aesthetic and narrative strategies of each case study influence the account of prohibition being given, without requiring that the accuracy of those accounts be established. Nevertheless, since there is currently very little scholarship that attempts to analyse the representation of prohibition, and since prohibition is a broad and multifaceted topic, the survey of prohibition literature is intended to provide a brief overview of the subject, indicating those areas that have been identified by scholars as particularly significant when considering the topic. This understanding of the range of representational issues that can apply to prohibition guides the textual analysis of narrative, character and style, and provides an understanding of what factors are most likely to be relevant to the analysis.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 87.

In relation to television, questions relating to the representation of drugs have typically been considered by scholars working within the field of media effects, whereby the representation of drugs, crime, law and order, etc. are analysed in relation to their putative effect on the beliefs and opinions of television audiences¹⁷⁰. While such work does address fictional representations¹⁷¹, more frequently the emphasis is on news and current affairs programming¹⁷², advertising¹⁷³, or other televisual forms¹⁷⁴. While such approaches can yield interesting results and highlight potential avenues for further investigation, the quantitative approach inevitably lacks detail and so cannot account for any but the most basic details of the programming being analysed¹⁷⁵. In relation to television drama, Paul Manning notes that “drug use began to intrude within the plots of drama serials and series in the early 1960s” until “by the late 1980s drug plots or subplots were common in dozens of drama series”¹⁷⁶. However, Manning goes on to state that,

Something shifted in the normative boundaries of television drama toward the end of the last century. Up to this point television drama might offer a sympathetic understanding of the drug user but nevertheless still construct such a character as ‘the other’; their difference not necessarily rooted in race, class or other dimensions of social identity, but certainly in terms of their drug habit. From the mid-1990s onward, drug use began to be

¹⁷⁰ See, Johanna Blakley and Sheena Nahm, ‘The Primetime War on Drugs and Terror: An Analysis of Depictions of the War on Terror and the War on Drugs in Popular Primetime Television Programs’, *Norman Lear Center* (2011); Brian A. Primack et al., ‘Media Exposure and Marijuana and Alcohol Use Among Adolescents’, *Substance Use & Misuse* 44:5 (2009), pp. 722-739; Peter G. Christenson, Lisa Henriksen, and Donald F. Roberts, *Substance Use in Popular Prime-Time Television* (Washington D.C.: Office of National Drug Control Policy, 2000).

¹⁷¹ See, Judith A. Long et al., ‘Use of Alcohol, Illicit Drugs, and Tobacco among Characters on Prime-Time Television’, *Substance Abuse* 23, no. 2 (June 2002), pp. 95-103.

¹⁷² For example, Franklin D. Gilliam Jr. and Shanto Iyengar, ‘Prime Suspects: The Influence of Local Television News on the Viewing Public’, *American Journal of Political Science* 44:3 (July 2000), pp. 560-573.

¹⁷³ See, for example, Peter Anderson et al., ‘Impact of Alcohol Advertising and Media Exposure on Adolescent Alcohol Use: A Systematic Review of Longitudinal Studies’, *Alcohol and Alcoholism* 44:3 (2009), pp. 229-243.

¹⁷⁴ See Yahya R. Kamalipour and Rampal R. Kuldip (eds.), *Media, Sex, Violence, and Drugs in the Global Village* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001).

¹⁷⁵ For an extended critique of media effects research, see David Gauntlett, *Moving Experiences: Media Effects and Beyond* 2nd ed. (Eastleigh, UK: John Libbey Pub.; Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, c2005).

¹⁷⁶ Paul Manning, *Drugs and Popular Culture in the Age of New Media*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 50.

understood in television drama as part of the fabric of everyday life, a backdrop against which the more important business of plots quite unrelated to drug use would play out.¹⁷⁷

While televisual representations of drug use became less dictated by the official ‘War on Drugs’ framework established by successive US administrations and governmental agencies, there were still very few examples of television that did not pathologise drug use and attempt to ‘other’ those that participated. It has only been in the period which roughly overlaps with the post-*Sopranos* period of prestige television that significant deviations from the status quo can be identified. As Manning writes, “the most striking evidence that might prompt claims regarding television drama’s contribution to a cultural normalisation or accommodation with illicit drug use is to be found in US shows like *Nurse Jackie*, *The Wire*, *Weeds*, *Breaking Bad*”¹⁷⁸. Beyond this account offered by Manning, there remains almost no significant scholarship that addresses television drama series in relation to the subject of prohibition.

In relation to cinema there does exist some textual analysis that focuses on the topic of prohibition, although this work is somewhat limited because it is highly polemical and written from an overtly anti-prohibition ideological position. Such readings are often narrowly focused, for example on racist depictions of deviance within drug war narratives, seeing the texts under discussion as complicit with the rhetoric and propaganda promulgated by official sources of prohibitionist ideology¹⁷⁹. The limitations of such an approach can be illustrated by reference to Susan Boyd's analysis of *Traffic* (Steven Soderbergh, 2000). Commenting on the film’s depiction of the relationship between the US and Mexico, Boyd states;

In the film, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) is depicted as opening the U.S.-Mexico border, fuelling a ‘free-for-all’ for foreign cartels. *Traffic* offers no

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 50-51.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷⁹ For examples of this approach see Bryan E. Denham, ‘Amplifications of Deviance Surrounding Illicit Drug Use: Conceptualizing a Role for Film’, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 3:4 (December 2010), pp. 485–502; Julien Mercille, ‘The Media-Entertainment Industry and the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico’, *Latin American Perspectives*, 41:2 (March 2014), pp. 110-129.

critique of how NAFTA has increased social and economic deprivation, decreased jobs, and lowered wages for the majority of Mexican people at the same time that a small percentage of Mexican society becomes richer and foreign investors profit.¹⁸⁰

Boyd's approach views the text primarily as a communications tool rather than an artwork, and judges it more or less exclusively on how it advances the anti-prohibition rhetoric and scholarship that she clearly subscribes to¹⁸¹. She frequently ignores or downplays factors like genre and tone which are likely to have a significant impact on how audiences experience prohibition texts (or indeed any text). She says of *Traffic*, "a number of politicians and the U.S. media praised it for its accurate depiction of the war on drugs"¹⁸² but dismisses this view with little analysis, on the basis that it does not condemn drug prohibition with sufficient zeal. By contrast, Leighton Grist analyses *Traffic* from a very similar perspective, but is far less didactic when discussing what aspects of the drug trade the film emphasises, and what it does not¹⁸³. While the substance of Boyd and Grist's analyses are very similar, Grist introduces his discussion of globalisation, neo-liberalism and NAFTA as a way of indicating to the reader some of the larger issues that the film could have engaged with, but chose not to. While this information may cause the reader to feel that the avoidance of such issues is a failing on the part of the filmmakers, such a conclusion is not mandated or even necessarily encouraged by the author¹⁸⁴. It is this approach that will be pursued in this research.

On this understanding, the final section of this literature review presents a brief overview of the plethora of issues and controversies that exist within prohibition scholarship, particularly as it relates to drugs. Although there is a lack of relevant film and television studies literature on drug

¹⁸⁰ Susan Boyd, *Hooked: Drug War Films in Britain, Canada, and the United States*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 137.

¹⁸¹ An almost identical example of this particular approach to the depiction of NAFTA in drug war film and television narratives can be seen in Mercille, 'The Media-Entertainment Industry'.

¹⁸² Boyd, *Hooked*, p. 136.

¹⁸³ Leighton Grist, 'Drugs, the Family and Recent American Cinema' in Paul Manning (ed.), *Drugs and Popular Culture: Drugs, Media and Identity in Contemporary Society*, (Abingdon, UK; Portland, OR: Willan Publishing, 2007), pp. 117-133.

¹⁸⁴ For a further example of this approach see Paul Manning, *Drugs and Popular Culture in the Age of New Media*, (New York: Routledge, 2014).

prohibition, the subject is amply addressed in other disciplines such as sociology, economics and criminology¹⁸⁵. For current purposes, the most relevant work is that which addresses the effects of prohibition on society as a whole, rather than the effect of drugs on the individual, although this is not an easy distinction. As Pierre Kopp notes, it is hard to separate the issue of drugs generally from that of prohibition;

There is never a drug debate that does not very quickly begin to discuss the pros and cons of prohibition. For some, the intrinsic harm of drugs justifies their being banned; the existence of illegal markets is a result, regrettable of course, but one that a more repressive policy could do away with. For others, it is precisely repressive public intervention that is the root of all evil because it plunges the consumer into the midst of a web of transactions which are not only illegal, but are, above all, dangerous. The dogged opposition between these two theses explains the recurrent nature of drug policy debates.¹⁸⁶

These opposing perspectives are a feature of practically every discussion about drug policy, particularly because the global nature of drug prohibition means that there are precious few examples of any other approach to act as a point of comparison. Prohibitionists inevitably argue that regardless of the harm currently caused by the prohibition of drugs, the situation would be far worse without it, while those who are anti-prohibition argue that many of the dangers associated with drugs are actually a product of prohibition, not the drugs themselves. There is now a heavy emphasis within the academic literature on the subject of ‘harm reduction’, which

¹⁸⁵ For an overview of the history of drug prohibition see David F. Musto (ed.), *Drugs in America: A Documentary History* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); Mike Jay, *Emperors of Dreams: Drugs in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Dedalus, 2000).

¹⁸⁶ Pierre Kopp, *Political Economy of Illegal Drugs* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 1.

attempts to assess the accuracy of these opposing perspectives in a broadly utilitarian attempt to determine the most effective and least harmful policy options¹⁸⁷.

While these concerns are primarily focused on the wellbeing of the individual drug user, there are also pronounced negative consequences of drug prohibition on a national and international scale. In a typical assessment, John Meadowcroft outlines the consequences that almost inevitably come with prohibition, whether of drugs or any other illicit commodity or service;

- Prohibition places markets into the hands of criminal enterprises.
- Prohibition increases the risks of already risky activities.
- Prohibition criminalises people who would not otherwise be criminals.
- Prohibition diverts law enforcement resources away from conduct that harms third parties.
- Prohibition increases public ignorance.
- Organised interest groups are crucial to the introduction of prohibitions.
- Prohibition almost never works and is almost always counterproductive.¹⁸⁸

Although these outcomes vary according to the severity of the penalties associated with a particular prohibition and the extent to which they are prosecuted by law enforcement, the basic conclusions are found repeated throughout the academic literature. Due to the scale of the global drug trade and the aggressiveness of its prohibition, many of these outcomes are far more pronounced than they are for other prohibited markets. This is a particular problem when it comes to the wealth generated by the drug trade since, as Sue Pryce notes, “drug prohibition has handed over enormous wealth not only to drug barons who use it to corrupt states for their own profit, but also to insurgents and terrorists who use drug money to fund their guerrilla campaigns

¹⁸⁷ For further discussion of harm reduction see David Nutt, *Drugs Without the Hot Air: Minimising the Harms of Legal and Illegal Drugs*, (Cambridge, UK: UIT Cambridge, 2012); Neil McKeganey, *Controversies in Drugs Policy and Practice* (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011); Philip Bean, *Legalising Drugs: Debates and Dilemmas* (Bristol, UK; Portland, OR: Policy, 2010).

¹⁸⁸ John Meadowcroft (ed.), *Prohibitions* (London: Institute of Economic Affairs, 2008), p. 25-30.

against their own and foreign states”¹⁸⁹. Many scholars have drawn comparisons between the violence and criminal enrichment produced by modern drug prohibition and that resulting from the American Prohibition of alcohol (1920-1933), usually to make the case that the former system is as flawed and ineffective as the latter¹⁹⁰. Significantly, one of the major arguments in favour of the recent marijuana legalisation efforts in the United States has been that it would eliminate a substantial part of the Mexican drug cartels’ income, weakening the cartels and hopefully stemming some of the violence associated with them¹⁹¹.

While the enrichment of criminal gangs and terrorist groups is clearly an undesirable outcome, much of the scholarship on prohibition foregrounds analysis of how the global drug prohibition movement engenders violence. In particular, the commitment of successive U.S. administrations to the view that the problem of American drug consumption is one of supply rather than demand, and the resulting 'War on Drugs' has had devastating consequences, first in Colombia during the 1980s, and more recently in Mexico during President Calderon’s crackdown on the drug cartels from 2006 onwards¹⁹². As Jeffrey Miron notes, prohibited markets are not considered to be inherently violent, rather “the factor that determines how much a given prohibition induces violence is the level of enforcement. Prohibitions are unlikely to create violence unless there is substantial enforcement, and the amount of violence increases with the

¹⁸⁹ Sue Pryce, *Fixing Drugs: The Politics of Drug Prohibition* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p. 106.

¹⁹⁰ For examples of this approach see Jeffrey A. Miron, *Drug War Crimes: The Consequences of Prohibition* (Oakland, CA: The Independent Institute, 2004), pp. 25-58; Harry G. Levine and Craig Reinerman, ‘From Prohibition to Regulation: Lessons from Alcohol Policy for Drug Policy’, *The Milbank Quarterly*, 69:3 (1991), pp. 461-494.

¹⁹¹ Julien Mercille, ‘Violent Narco-Cartels or US Hegemony? The Political Economy of the ‘War on Drugs’ in Mexico’, *Third World Quarterly* 32: 9 (2011), pp. 1637–1653; William Booth, ‘Mexico Says Marijuana Legalization in U.S. Could Change Anti-Drug Strategies’, *The Washington Post* (8 November 2012), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/mexico-says-marijuana-legalization-in-us-could-change-anti-drug-strategies/2012/11/08/7e6d45ba-29ca-11e2-aaa5-ac786110c486_print.html>; Gary Johnson, ‘Legalize Marijuana to Stop the Drug Cartels’, *The Huffington Post* (26 August 2010), <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gary-johnson/legalize-marijuana-to-sto_b_696430.html>.

¹⁹² For more on US drug war intervention in foreign countries, see Coletta A. Youngers and Eileen Rosin (eds.), *Drugs and Democracy in Latin America: The Impact of US Policy* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005); Russell Crandall, *Driven by Drugs: US Policy Toward Colombia* (Boulder, CO; London: Lynne Rienner, 2002); Nigel Inkster and Virginia Comolli, *Drugs, Insecurity and Failed States: The Problems of Prohibition* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2012); George W. Grayson, *Mexico: Narco-Violence and a Failed State?* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010).

degree of enforcement”¹⁹³. The more severe the enforcement of prohibition, the fewer chances there are to settle disputes between market participants in non-violent ways¹⁹⁴. Moreover, the greater the surveillance and enforcement of prohibition, the more likely it is that there will be on-going disruption within the prohibited market as suppliers are driven out of business, creating gaps in the supply chain that stimulate violent conflict as rivals seek to fill the vacancy¹⁹⁵. At the time of writing, the consequences of these policies are being brought to America's doorstep in the form of children from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador who are fleeing intolerable levels of drug violence in their home countries, much of it a direct consequence of U.S. drug interdiction¹⁹⁶.

However, while the most destructive externalities of the War on Drugs are borne by other countries, within the United States there is still considerable unease regarding some of the domestic consequences of drug prohibition. The unparalleled growth of the US prison population has been overwhelmingly fuelled by an influx of non-violent drug offenders, creating cycles of criminality and incarceration¹⁹⁷. An accompanying concern has been the racial disparities which see white drug users and dealers arrested, convicted and incarcerated at far lower rates than minorities, particularly African Americans¹⁹⁸. These issues have been exacerbated by the increased militarisation of American police forces and the use of military

¹⁹³ Miron, *Drug War Crimes*, p. 44.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., pp. 44-46.

¹⁹⁵ For more on the link between prohibition and violence see Dan Werb et al., ‘Effect of Drug Law Enforcement on Drug Market Violence: A Systematic Review’, *International Journal of Drug Policy* 22:2 (2011), pp. 87-94; Peter Andreas and Joel Wallman (eds.), ‘Special Issue on Illicit Markets and Violence’, *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 52:3 (September 2009); Andrew J. Resignato, ‘Violent Crime: A Function of Drug Use or Drug Enforcement’, *Applied Economics* 32 (2000), pp. 681-688.

¹⁹⁶ Ted Galen Carpenter, ‘The Child Migrant Crisis is Just the Latest disastrous Consequence of America’s Drug War’, *The Washington Post*, July 21st 2014, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-watch/wp/2014/07/21/the-child-migrant-crisis-is-just-the-latest-disastrous-consequence-of-americas-drug-war/>

¹⁹⁷ Fareed Zakaria, Incarceration Nation: The War on Drugs has Succeeded Only in Putting Millions of Americans in Jail, *Time* (2 April 2012), <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2109777,00.html>

¹⁹⁸ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); Alexander Papachristou (ed.), *Blind Goddess: a Reader on Race and Justice* (New York: New Press: 2011).

tactics typically against poor, urban populations¹⁹⁹. The ripple effects of these policies and practices are hard to adequately account for, but even a cursory overview of the negative externalities of the War on Drugs raises serious and uncomfortable questions about whether the harm caused by drugs outweighs the harm produced by drug prohibition. The fact that the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the War on Drugs has failed to curb American drug use only exacerbates anxieties over the relative benefits and costs of the policy²⁰⁰.

These anxieties may go some way to explaining why, since the turn of the century, American attitudes regarding drugs and their prohibition have undergone a fairly significant shift, particularly when it comes to marijuana. Since 1996, twenty U.S. states have passed laws that allow for the use of medicinal marijuana and this trend culminated in 2012 when ballot initiatives in Washington and Colorado were approved by voters, making recreational marijuana legal at the state level. This popular rebuttal of marijuana prohibition has now been tacitly endorsed by the federal government, with Attorney General Eric Holder decreeing that the new laws will not be challenged and that banks may legally handle money from recreational marijuana businesses²⁰¹. Public opinion regarding marijuana legalisation has liberalised significantly over the course of the last decade, after barely altering since the War on Drugs was instigated²⁰². While similar changes have not occurred in relation to other illegal drugs, the softening of attitudes surrounding marijuana at least indicates that the institution of drug prohibition is facing its most significant challenges since the War on Drugs began²⁰³. Recent

¹⁹⁹ For discussion of police tactics in the War on Drugs, see Mike Davis, 'The Hammer and the Rock', *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), pp. 267-322; Radley Balko, *Rise of the Warrior Cop: The Militarization of America's Police Forces* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

²⁰⁰ Lloyd D. Johnston, Patrick M. O'Malley, Jerald G. Bachman, and John E. Schulenberg, *Monitoring the Future National Results on Drug Use: 2012 Overview, Key Findings on Adolescent Drug Use* (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, The University of Michigan, 2013).

²⁰¹ Jack Healy and Matt Apuzzo, 'Legal Marijuana Businesses Should Have Access to Banks, Holder Says', *The New York Times*, January 23, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/24/us/legal-marijuana-businesses-should-have-access-to-banks-holder-says.html>

²⁰² Lydia Saad, 'Majority Continues to Support Pot Legalization in U.S.', *Gallup.com*, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/179195/majority-continues-support-pot-legalization.aspx>.

²⁰³ The liberalisation of American attitudes to drugs in the past fifteen years has to some extent been reflected within American film and television, with a number of films treating marijuana use as a mostly harmless indulgence. For cinematic examples see, *Knocked Up* (Judd Apatow, 2007), *Pineapple Express* (David Gordon

opinion polls have indicated that the vast majority of the American public views the War on Drugs as a failed policy, although opinion is far less cohesive when considering what the solution to the current impasse might be²⁰⁴.

These shifts in public perception and prosecutorial zeal have not been limited to the United States – rather they appear to be part of an increasingly global resistance to the War on Drugs that has involved the decriminalisation of all illegal drugs in Portugal²⁰⁵ and the legalisation of marijuana in Uruguay²⁰⁶. Even traditional U.S. allies in the drug war, like Mexico and Colombia, have decriminalised the possession of small quantities of drugs, and as Ioan Grillo notes,

For decades, any talk of drug legalization was viewed by politicians across the hemisphere as a toxic vote-loser, pooh-poohed by pundits as a nonstarter. Now, active or former presidents of Uruguay, Brazil, Argentina, Bolivia, Guatemala, Colombia and Mexico are all calling for a rethink of prohibitionist policies.²⁰⁷

While these developments may seem relatively moderate, they do at least indicate that the previously unquestioned necessity of drug prohibition is being challenged more openly than at any point in the last fifty years, making the subject particularly apt for consideration.

Green, 2008), *Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle* (Danny Leiner, 2004), *Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay* (Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, 2008), *A Very Harold & Kumar 3D Christmas* (Todd Strauss-Schulson, 2011), *How High* (Jesse Dylan, 2001), *Your Highness* (David Gordon Green, 2011), *The Wackness* (Jonathan Levine, 2008), *Ted* (Seth MacFarlane, 2012), *This is the End* (Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, 2013). For televisual examples see, *Weeds*, *Broad City* (Comedy Central, 2014-), *Bored to Death* (HBO, 2009-2011), *That '70s Show* (FOX, 1998-2006), *Silicon Valley* (HBO, 2014-).

²⁰⁴ Renee Schlerlen, 'The Never-Ending Drug War: Obstacles to Drug War Policy Termination', *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 45:1 (January 2012), pp. 67-73.

²⁰⁵ For details on the outcome of the Portuguese experiment see Glenn Greenwald, *Drug Decriminalization in Portugal: Lessons for Creating Fair and Successful Drug Policies* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2009).

²⁰⁶ For other examples of recent drug liberalisation movements, see Global Commission on Drug Policy, *Taking Control: Pathways to Drug Policies That Work*, (September 2014), p. 14-15.

²⁰⁷ Ioan Grillo, 'Drug War No More', *The New York Times*, (27 November 2013),

<<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/28/opinion/drug-war-no-more.html>>. See also, Organization of American States, *The Drug Problem in the Americas* (May 17 2013), http://www.oas.org/documents/eng/press/Introduction_and_Analytical_Report.pdf

Each of the three upcoming chapters addresses the ways in which each case study engages with prohibition as a representational field, and the extent to which the similarities and differences that arise can be understood as consequences of their narrative and aesthetic composition. The scholarship covered in this literature review takes on differing levels of importance in relation to each case study, with their respective chapters introducing additional series-specific literature to provide context for the exegesis. While each chapter features some comparison of the case studies, the most sustained and substantial comparison of their similarities and differences come in the conclusion. The following chapter deals with *The Wire* and the degree to which its representation of prohibition has been both understood and overlooked within the academic literature.

Chapter 2: *The Wire*

First broadcast on HBO in 2002, *The Wire* is one of the earliest examples of fully-serialised prestige television to emerge on American television, and the scale of its centrifugal narrative is still exceptional. Across its five seasons, the series not only sustains a consistent focus on the battle of wits between the Baltimore Police Department and the city's most prominent drug dealers, but with each season the series expands its depiction of Baltimore to include different areas of the metropolis ranging from the stevedores union to city government, the schools, and the local newspaper. With each new institution featured, the centrifugal narrative moves further and further out from the original cast of characters, tracing how the conflicts arising from the prohibition of drugs produce ripple effects that spread throughout the city.

This chapter begins by surveying the extensive body of academic literature that has arisen around the series, in order to indicate how certain scholarly tendencies have contrived to underplay the centrality of prohibition to the overall narrative organisation of each season and the series as a whole. Through the close analysis of the five 'cold opens' that begin each new season of *The Wire*, this section will indicate how a close analysis of the text indicates the balance that is struck between the new institutional focus of each season, and the series' on-going representation of prohibition across the length of its run. Moreover it seeks to demonstrate that despite the assertions of both the series' creators and a significant number of scholarly commentators, *The Wire* is not best understood as an example of Greek tragedy or Dickensian literature, but as one of the most traditional forms of television fiction: the crime drama. The rest of the chapter consists of analyses of the series' two most overt and sustained representations of the forces at work within a prohibited marketplace. The first of these sections analyses the third season storyline regarding the pseudo-legalisation of drugs within an area of the city known as

‘Hamsterdam’. This is followed by a section comparing and contrasting the three principal drug dealers that draw the sustained investigative attention of the Major Crimes Unit, and how their different business strategies each highlight particular aspects of prohibition. The conclusion draws all three sections together and offers an analysis of how the centrifugal drive of the narrative influences each area of representation in particular ways.

The section on Hamsterdam emphasises the synthesis of style, narrative and character that arguably constructs particular conclusions regarding the nature of prohibition, while ensuring that the world of the series remains coherent. The Hamsterdam storyline assembles a hypothetical account of illicit market forces based on the previously established parameters regarding the representation of prohibition in the series. This section focuses on the characters of Major Colvin (Robert Wisdom) and Sergeant Carter (Seth Gilliam) and how each character is elaborated throughout the third season in order to engender a sympathetic understanding of the arguments being advanced regarding the War on Drugs. This section also considers how, despite assertions that the series employs a ‘zero-degree style’, a sensitive close reading of the mise-en-scène and editing in several scenes demonstrates how the aesthetic construction of the series aids and develops the representation of prohibition being made through character and narrative.

The final section focuses on the series’ three main drug dealers – Avon Barksdale (Wood Harris), Stringer Bell (Idris Elba) and Marlo Stanfield (Jamie Hector) – and their different approaches to the drug trade. This section argues that the beliefs and behaviours of each character emphasise a different aspect of prohibition, enabling each season to develop and refine the account presented in earlier seasons. The interplay of these three characters and their differing strategic approaches to succeeding in the drug trade can be understood as a sustained demonstration of the fundamental principles underpinning *The Wire*’s representation of prohibition, and in particular its relationship to violence. This section emphasises how the sustained focus on prohibition at the centre of the story allows for the centrifugal narrative to

expand outwards, while also providing the possibility of re-iteration in relation to the police and drug dealer storylines. This provides the opportunity for successive seasons to build on the representation of prohibition in previous seasons, while placing different degrees of emphasis on particular aspects of the prohibited marketplace.

Of the three case studies used in this thesis, *The Wire* has drawn by far the greatest attention in academic circles, both within television studies and further afield, to the point where it has been incorporated into several university sociology modules both in the United States and Britain. However not all *Wire* scholarship is rigorous in its attention to the text, particularly as it relates to the representation of prohibition within the series. This is addressed in the first two sections of the chapter. Part of the problem is that the series has been co-opted as a teaching aid in a wide variety of fields, whose scholars are mainly concerned with the particular theory, argument, thinker, school or concept they are seeking to illustrate, and for whom the text itself can be incidental. This leads many writers to claim that the War on Drugs storyline established in the first season is simply a vehicle for taking the story into new (and to them, more interesting) areas. This chapter argues that the drugs storyline is fundamental to the overall theme and organisation of the series and that attempting to understand *The Wire* without reference to prohibition will only ever be partially successful. This is not to claim that it is the only relevant consideration – the number and diversity of interpretations of the series should be demonstration enough that it is a text capable of accommodating multiple interests. But the crime narrative is by far the most consistent and substantial part of the series, and this should be acknowledged even by those whose interests in it lie with other features.

Reading *The Wire*

In his survey of the scholarship on *The Wire*, Frank Kelleter outlines five rhetorical positions that academics often take when writing about the series, which he calls “competitive

duplication, downward identification, activist concern, upward recognition, and analytical dislocation”²⁰⁸. ‘Downward identification’ involves academics self-consciously drawing attention to their “remoteness from the world shown in *The Wire* and, significantly, perceive it as a deficit to be explained, excused or neutralised”²⁰⁹. This need seems to arise from the widely-held assumption that *The Wire* has a particularly privileged level of authenticity that makes the distance between the show’s street characters and the academics studying them particularly problematic or galling. Some writers try to legitimate their position by “establishing autobiographical credentials as an African American, Baltimorean, former members of the proletariat, minority speaker, or other identity, all the while reproducing the show’s insistence that privileged access yields authentic knowledge”²¹⁰. This speaks to a widespread flaw in *Wire* scholarship, which is the tendency of writers to insufficiently distance themselves from the discourses of legitimacy and realism that the show’s creators, HBO’s publicity department, and various fan communities circulate, and which the formal construction of the series is designed to encourage.

Several writers have demonstrated how aspects of the series’ production can be understood as strategies for establishing the closeness of the fictional Baltimore to its real-life counterpart, thus strengthening its credentials as a work of social realism. Lisa Kelley highlights how the casting of non-actors (including former Baltimore drug dealers, cops and politicians) helps blur the distinction between the real city and its fictional representation²¹¹. Erlend Lavik has outlined how the dialogue of the series works in a similar way, by using slang that is distinct to Baltimore and also by refusing to explain to the audience what particular street-slang and work-related jargon means. As Lavik writes, “this lends the conversation a certain eavesdropping

²⁰⁸ Frank Kelleter, ‘*The Wire* and its Readers’ in Liam Kennedy and Stephen Shapiro (eds.), *The Wire: Race, Class and Genre*, (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2012), p. 40.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 44.

²¹⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

²¹¹ Lisa W. Kelly, ‘Casting *The Wire*: Complicating Notions of Performance, Authenticity, and Otherness’, *Dark Matter: In the Ruins of Imperial Culture*, 4 (2011), <<http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/casting-the-wire-complicating-notions-of-performance-authenticity-and-otherness/>>.

quality, camouflaging the ways in which the dialogue is nevertheless carefully *constructed*²¹², a point also made by James Zborowski in his discussion of the rhetoric employed throughout the series²¹³. While these writers are alert to the ways in which the ‘authenticity’ of the series is constructed, others are less critical and more accepting of the series’ status as an essentially accurate depiction of modern Baltimore.

Similar flaws manifest themselves in a further two of Kelleter’s categories; ‘competitive duplication’ and ‘activist concern’. Activist concern gives so much weight to the show’s supposed authenticity and realism that the writer then proceeds to criticise the show for what it omits from its depiction of Baltimore life. As Kelleter writes, “ultimately, this amounts to blaming the series for what it is, advocating not just different or more critical readings but hoping for different narrative to replace it... as scholarship, these readings sometimes show little interest in investigating the real work done by a real narrative”²¹⁴. This can also lead to an overemphasis of what is seen as the pessimism of the show’s outlook, again predicated on the idea that because more hopeful or idealistic social institutions are absent from the narrative, that necessarily means that the critiques of the ones that are present are deliberately bleak and nihilistic. These are difficult challenges to respond to because they rely almost entirely on examples that are not part of the text (indeed that is the basis of the criticism). The flaw here is that critiquing what is not part of the narrative principally draws attention to what the author considers important, and adds little to the reader’s understanding of what the text actually has to offer.

Competitive duplication is probably the most prevalent flaw in *Wire* scholarship. Kelleter describes the problem as being that:

²¹² Erlend Lavik, ‘The Poetics and Rhetoric of *The Wire*’s Intertextuality’, *Critical Studies in Television*, 6:1 (Spring 2011), p. 54.

²¹³ James Zborowski, ‘The Rhetoric of *The Wire*’, *Movie: A Journal of Film Criticism*, 1 (2010), <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/arts/film/movie/contents/rhetoric_of_the_wire.pdf>.

²¹⁴ Kelleter, *The Wire and its Readers*, p. 49-50.

In its thematic selections and interpretive interests, English-language scholarship on *The Wire* is to a large degree dependent on prior discussions in the press and on the internet. These journalistic discussions, in turn, exhibit a pronounced tendency to duplicate isolated self-descriptions of the show, relying on David Simon's interviews, HBO public relations material, and other journalistic pieces.²¹⁵

Often this can stem from writers wanting to reduce the many themes and ideas of the series to a few digestible sentences. Quoting David Simon is thus a tempting way to summarise the series while also giving the summation the seductive weight of auteur authority. However, at its worst, this tendency can result in academic articles that not only "duplicate statements from the show's paratexts", but "often transform them into statements of fact or treat them as if they were results of analysis"²¹⁶. A frequent example of this is David Simon's claim that "*The Wire* is a Greek tragedy in which the postmodern institutions are the Olympian forces"²¹⁷, an idea also present in Simon's original pitch of the series to HBO²¹⁸. This notion of the series as a Greek tragedy is repeated routinely throughout *Wire* scholarship, yet it is almost never developed, or followed by textual examples. Of the many articles that regurgitate this line, only two²¹⁹ actually make any attempt to engage with this claim and treat it as a hypothesis to be questioned and explored, rather than as simply a 'known fact' employed to bolster an argument. For example, Alasdair McMillan approvingly quotes the Greek tragedy line before going on to write that:

By emphasizing the power of such institutional forces, Simon effectively rules out the independence and extraordinary virtue of traditional police heroes, along with the ethos

²¹⁵ Ibid., p. 40.

²¹⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

²¹⁷ Nick Hornby, 'Interview with David Simon, *Believer Magazine* (August 2007), http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon

²¹⁸ David Simon, 'The Wire Bible' (6 September 2000), http://kottke.org.s3.amazonaws.com/the-wire/The_Wire_-_Bible.pdf.

²¹⁹ Chris Love, 'Greek Gods in Baltimore: Greek Tragedy and *The Wire*', *Criticism*, 52:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 487-507; Mark Chou, "'We Like Them Bitches on the Chess Board': Tragedy, Politics and The Wire', *CTHEORY* (20 January 2011), <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=677>>.

of “catharsis and redemption and triumph of character” which once governed their stories.

In this respect, an affinity with the social theory of Michel Foucault is evident... Like Foucault, Simon casts aside cherished beliefs about the legitimacy of legal institutions in order to examine the concrete effects of their power on individuals.²²⁰

While McMillan’s chapter is not without insight, the examples he uses to support his arguments about the compatibility of Foucault’s theories with *The Wire* are overwhelmingly taken not from the text itself, but from interviews conducted with David Simon. Consequently, while his piece makes a case for an overlap in the thinking of Foucault and Simon, it is of limited interest with regard to the series itself.

This example also demonstrates one of the other issues described by Kelleter, which he calls ‘upward recognition’ or “interpretations inspired by large explanatory systems commonly classified as Theory”²²¹. This generally consists of a scholar with a specific theory or theorist that they want to discuss using *The Wire* as a pretext. This approach can still produce interesting scholarship, but very often results in work that either overlooks the text in favour of paratexts that are easier to condense and quote, or alternatively “limit descriptions to those elements that harmonize with the master-theory”²²². The size of *The Wire* as a text means that it is particularly easy to select scenes that seem to fit a particular theory, while ignoring those which may undermine the claims being made. This is a cart-before-the-horse problem that befalls many writers whose main concern is to have the text support the theory, rather than have the theory provide insight into the text.

²²⁰ Alastair McMillan, ‘Heroism, Institutions and the Police Procedural’, in Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, (New York: Continuum, 2009), pp. 50-51.

²²¹ Kelleter, ‘*The Wire* and its Readers’, p. 51.

²²² Ibid., p. 54.

Bramall and Pitcher write that “the feedback loop here, whereby *The Wire*’s audience is presented with objects of their own desire, is not a narrow and specific one but part of a broader cultural process of representational want and satisfaction in which the show’s writers and creators are likewise implicated”²²³. Scholars are drawn to the show because it appears to offer a comprehensive depiction of the social structures of the city, and that vision seduces precisely because it shows them what they want to see. Bramall and Pitcher lay out their main argument;

It is important not to take these ‘sociological’ claims at face value. Indeed, we want to suggest, as before, that they reveal as much about the desires of *The Wire*’s audience as any nascent social truth. *The Wire* can thus be read as a ‘realist’ fantasy: it doesn’t describe an ideal world – its vision is certainly not an escapist or utopian one – but rather it depicts an ideal knowledge of, or orientation to, the world. *The Wire*’s institutional approach to social conflict and its apparent engagement with the complexities of post-industrial global capitalism offers a seductively intelligible vision of social and cultural complexity, and this intelligibility, in our view, is again the product of audience desire. By appearing to set out a cognitive map of contemporary social life, *The Wire* seems to confer legibility on the social, yet in truth only really reflects back its audience’s yearning for social legibility.²²⁴

To Bramall and Pitcher, *The Wire* is interesting not because it offers insights into the inner workings of society, as many other scholars attempt to argue, but because it demonstrates the powerful desire of its audience (particularly a scholarly one) for the social to be sensible. Although the series clearly rewards sociological analysis, *The Wire* is a text with a certain degree of messiness to it. Quoting publicity material and David Simon interviews over the text itself helps to eliminate much of this messiness. Yet this is precisely why it is important to examine the detailed construction of the series – how it engages with the legacy of its generic

²²³ Rebecca Bramall and Ben Pitcher, ‘Policing the Crisis, or, Why We Love *The Wire*’, *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 16: 1 (January 2013), p. 94.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

forebears, how it seduces its audience by projecting their desires back at them, how affect is developed in order to drive the audience towards particular emotional and intellectual responses.

To a certain extent this can be seen as a problem of audiences – much of the scholarship on *The Wire* is written by scholars without a film/television studies background, and their interest in the series is based on its ability to get students or readers interested in sociological or philosophical ideas. Asked why he was teaching a class on *The Wire* at Harvard, the sociologist William Julius Wilson, said “what I’m concentrating on is how this series so brilliantly illustrates theories and processes that social scientists have been writing about for years”²²⁵. This goes some way to explaining why, for some scholars, the text per se is of limited interest. It is also far easier and less time-consuming to read a few thousand words of an interview with a co-creator than to spend sixty hours getting to grips with his art. This may be all that is necessary if the goal is to pique the reader’s interest in a particular theory or thinker, but for scholars and students looking for a nuanced and detailed exegesis, much of *Wire* scholarship can be frustrating and unrewarding.

The value of *The Wire* should not be assessed on how accurately or compellingly it projects a particular theoretical model or political argument. Its success lies in the way it provides its audience with a world in which they are able to see their own desire for social legibility reflected back at them so compellingly. In the context of this research, the goal is not to demonstrate a particular argument concerning the subject of prohibition and illicit markets, but to show how such issues are being opened up for the audience to engage with according to their own criteria.

***The Wire*: A Crime Drama**

²²⁵ Drake Bennett, ‘This Will Be on the Midterm. You Feel Me?: Why So Many Colleges are Teaching *The Wire*’, *Slate.com* (24 March 2010), http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/culturebox/2010/03/this_will_be_on_the_midterm_you_feel_me.single.html

A common feature of *Wire* scholarship is to emphasise its seasonal structure and the way this dictates the thematic subject matter that is being addressed. Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer and Roger Burrows write that “in each of the five seasons, adding up to 60 episodes in total, *The Wire* focuses on a different facet of Baltimore: the drug trade, the port, the city bureaucracy, the school system and the print news media”²²⁶. Marsha Kinder states that “each season *The Wire* shifts the focus to a different segment of society: the drug wars, the docks, city politics, education, and the media”²²⁷, and Sean O’Sullivan echoes this, writing that “season 1 concentrated on housing projects; season 2 on the shipyards; season 3 on the political arena; season 4 on the schools; season 5 on the newspaper business”²²⁸. At first glance this could be regarded a reasonable characterisation of the progression of the narrative focus of the series across its run. Yet this summary is indicative of a strain of scholarship that views the conflict between the police and the drug gangs as being almost exclusively the thematic concern of season one. While it is understandable to classify each season by highlighting the new institutional context that is introduced, the expansion of the narrative should not be mistaken for a wholesale transfer of attention from one domain to another. The challenge of analysing fully-serialised immense texts can make the obvious division between seasons into a useful mechanism for containing the scale of the text, but in some cases this can also distort the overall narrative organisation by making it appear more stable and contained than it actually is. In *The Wire* the internecine struggle between the police and the drug gangs continues to be the motivating focus of the narrative throughout all five seasons, and while this approach repeatedly opens up new institutions and groups of characters, they become additional demonstrations of the problems caused by the War on Drugs, not separate concerns.

²²⁶ Ruth Penfold-Mounce, David Beer and Roger Burrows, ‘*The Wire* as Social-Science Fiction?’, *Sociology*, 45:1 (2011), p. 154.

²²⁷ Marsha Kinder, ‘Re-Wiring Baltimore: The Emotive Power of Systemics, Seriality, and the City’, *Film Quarterly*, 62:2 (Winter 2008), p. 52.

²²⁸ Sean O’Sullivan, ‘Broken on Purpose: Poetry, Serial Television, and the Season’, *StoryWorlds*, 2 (2010), p. 70.

One way of appreciating this is to consider the opening credit sequences of each season of the series. Andrew Dignan writes that,

The Wire's opening credits are not an ordinary credits sequence, but a series of four short films that distil each season's theme, goals, and motifs... the images are taken out of context from the season's individual episodes and arranged in a pattern that only makes sense if you watch the show closely. The content changes significantly from season to season, yet each credits sequence adheres to the same basic editing rhythms and visual schemes. The theme music is always Tom Waits' 'Way Down in the Hole', but each season it's performed by a different artist from a different genre.²²⁹

Two features of the credit sequences are important when considering how the thematic and narrative concerns of each season should be understood in the wider context of the series. The first is that while, as Dignan suggests, the images presented in each sequence do come predominantly from scenes within that particular season, there are also shots that recur across two, three, four or all five of the credit sequences. The three shots that reoccur in every sequence are an ECU of a phone number appearing on the monitor of a 'dialled number recorder', a CU of a CCTV camera, and an image of Bodie (J. D. Williams) throwing a rock that breaks the lens of the camera, as seen from the camera's POV. Two shots involve technology used for the purposes of police surveillance and the third is a very direct example of resistance on the part of those being surveyed. The fact that these shots appear in every credit sequence suggests that they are considered particularly relevant to the overall narrative of each season, even as new images are added and recontextualised around them. Furthermore, the fact that each sequence is accompanied by the same song performed by different artists in different styles also indicates that while some facets change from season to season, the underlying theme is maintained throughout. As the three repeated shots indicate, the recurring theme across all five seasons of

²²⁹ Andrew Dignan, 'The Wire and the Art of the Credit Sequence', *Slant Magazine* (22 September 2006), <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house/2006/09/the-wire-and-the-art-of-the-credit-sequence/>.

The Wire is the conflict between the drug dealers and the eyes and ears of the police that monitor them.

This analysis may seem somewhat unnecessary, since it is obvious to anyone who views all five seasons of the series that the struggle between the police and the drug gangs is an ever-present feature. The reason why this needs to be demonstrated is that too often there is a tendency to treat the cops and criminals narrative as simply a foundation upon which the more important and interesting thematic concerns can be built. The problem with thinking about the series in this way is that while *The Wire*'s seasons are undoubtedly more rigidly structured and divided than many other series, splitting them in this way is still distractingly reductive. Seeing the development of the series as a season by season shift in subject matter means focusing on what is new at the expense of what has gone before. Nick Sabotka (Pablo Schreiber) is one of the central characters of the second season, yet after that season he appears in only one more scene. Tommy Carcetti (Aidan Gillen) is one of the central characters of the third season, but also of the fourth and fifth seasons as well. The fourth season of *The Wire* is heavily structured around the lives of the middle school foursome of Dukie (Jermaine Crawford), Randy (Maestro Harrell), Namond (Julito McCullum) and Michael (Tristan Wilds), yet in the fifth season Michael and Dukie remain central to the story while Namond and Randy are, like Nick Sabotka, confined to single scene cameo appearances. While breaking the five seasons down into thematic or institutional categories is fine as a broad-strokes summation, any argument asserting that this is fundamental to the structure of the text as a whole does a considerable disservice to the complexity of the narrative, while also inviting the central subject of the series to be disregarded.

The reality of *The Wire* is that each season introduces a new institution and a new set of characters that are closely connected to it, but those characters only remain relevant to the story if they are tied to either the police department or the drug trade. Prez (Jim True-Frost) is an

important character in the first three seasons, as his apprenticeship under Freamon (Clarke Peters) and his talent for the paper-trail makes him essential to the work carried out by the Major Crimes Unit. He remains a central character in the fourth (schools) season because his accidental shooting of a fellow officer towards the end of season three prompts him to quit the police force and take up teaching – Randy, Dukie, Namond and Michael becomes his students. Yet in the fifth season he is absent, apart from the final episode. Having changed careers he is no longer a direct participant in the War on Drugs and so he disappears from the narrative. The police and drug dealer storyline is not just one equal part out of five; it is the main storyline of the first season, and the second, third, fourth and fifth seasons. The stevedores' union is brought down by the combined might of the drug trade and the Baltimore Police Department (BPD); Tommy Carcetti's rise to power is predicated on his relationships within the BPD and the continuing violence of the feuding drug gangs; the lives of the four boys are each irreparably altered by the drug trade (it sends Randy to a group home, Namond to the Colvins, Dukie to the needle and separates Michael from his younger brother, Bug [Keenon Brice]); the Baltimore Sun narrative is driven by the fake serial killer invented by McNulty in order to provide funds that can be used to bring down Marlo. The only possible exception to the rule is Bubbles (Andre Royo) – by the fifth season he is clean, no longer in the game and trying to live a civilian life, so he no longer has a direct connection to the drug economy. However, as an addict, his exit from the game is a protracted and painful one, unlike the drug dealer Poot (Trey Chaney) who reappears in the fifth season working in a shoe store having become tired with the drug trade (presumably as a result of Bodie's murder at the end of the fourth season). Aside from brief cameo appearances, the presiding logic of *The Wire* is that unless a character continues to be significantly involved with, or influenced by, either the drug trade or the police department, they will not reappear in the series beyond the season in which they initially featured.

A similarly telling indication that the series is predominantly concerned with the drug war comes from analysing the 'cold opens' that begin each episode, specifically those that introduce

the first episode of a new season. Every episode of *The Wire* begins with an opening scene ('cold open') that leads into the credit sequence, which ends with a quotation that will occur as dialogue in the upcoming episode. The cold opens can vary in purpose, sometimes providing crucial plot development while at other times acting as a tonal touch point or a metaphor relevant to the upcoming episode. Since they are separated from the rest of the episode by the title sequence, the cold opens also offer an opportunity for more expressive aesthetic techniques, since the isolation of the scene means that it is less likely to clash with the show's understated aesthetic. Notable examples would include the sound mixing that simulates Bubbles' unusually heightened sensitivity to his environment when he is going cold turkey (s01e10), and the Mexican stand-off between Omar (Michael K. Williams) and Brother Mouzone (Michael Potts) (s03e11), with its crane shot, low angles and atmospheric backlighting (fig. 1&2). While the cold opens are used in many ways, their position at the start of the episode makes them more likely to be considered as self-contained entities, rather than as one piece of a larger whole. This is particularly relevant when considering the first cold open of each season, because these not only re-orient the audience to the storyworld but also offer allegories through which it is possible to discern some of the thematic concerns that will be most prominent in the upcoming season.

The first episode's dialogue scene between McNulty and a murder witness (Kamal Bostic-Smith) regarding the name, character and demise of Snot Boogie has been widely discussed²³⁰. In the witness' final assertion that, despite Snot Boogie's habit of attempting to rob the local dice game every week, he still was allowed to play because "this is America, man", the scene sets out the essential idea of the American Dream and the right to access it regardless of other factors. This gestures towards the sense of ambiguity that will come to define the tone of the

²³⁰ For more detail see C.W. Marshall and Tiffany Porter, "'I Am the American Dream': Modern Urban Tragedy and the Borders of Fiction' in Marshall and Porter (eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, pp 1-15; Mark Chou, 'Politics and *The Wire*', *CTHEORY* (20 January 2011), <<http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=677>>; Hua Hsu, 'Walking in Someone Else's City: *The Wire* and the Limits of Empathy', *Criticism* 52:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 509-528.

show, particularly as it relates to the characters that operate within the illicit drug economy. They may be breaking the rules or the law, but from the perspective of Snot Boogie's friend, that should not preclude them from being allowed to continue playing.

In the second season opening, the focus on the loss of American manufacturing jobs is introduced by having McNulty and his police boat partner discuss when their fathers lost their jobs at the local steel mill. The scene ends with McNulty accepting a bribe from a group of wealthy Washingtonians whose boat has broken down in the shipping lanes, but who don't want their party to be over yet. The implication of the scene is that the police are more concerned with their own self-interest in the service of the political and social elite, than with upholding the law for the good of the working people of Baltimore. Indeed, the season focuses on an investigation into the stevedores' union which is motivated by the petty personal vendetta of Major Valchek (Al Brown), so this scene alerts the audience to features that will become prominent as the series progresses, while also providing an evocative visual metaphor.

The third and fourth seasons are particularly notable for how well they blend plot and character development with more allegorical elements, driving the story forward while still providing the audience with an indication of the issues that will be foregrounded in the rest of the season. The third season begins with Poot and Bodie debating the importance (both in business and personal terms) of the demolition of the project towers that have been home to the Barksdale drug trade in the previous seasons²³¹. Poot's sentimentality is contrasted with Bodie's hard-nosed business concerns. This provides character information while also emphasising that one of the major themes of the upcoming season will be the question of how change and reform can impact the

²³¹ For further analysis of this scene see Elizabeth Bonjean, 'After the Towers Fell: Bodie Broadus and the Space of Memory', in Potter and Marshall (eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, pp.162-174; Mark Chou, 'When the Towers Fell: Mourning and Nostalgia after 9/11 in HBO's *The Wire*', *e-International Relations*, 25 May 2010, <http://www.e-ir.info/?p=4217>; Sara Taylor, 'The Wire: Investigating the use of a Neoliberal Institutional Apparatus and a 'New Humanist' Philosophical Apparatus', *darkmatter* 29 May 2009, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2009/05/29/the-wire-investigating-the-use-of-a-neoliberal-institutional-apparatus-and-a-new-humanist-philosophical-apparatus/>; Mark Chou, "'We Like Them Bitches on the Chess Board': Tragedy, Politics and *The Wire*", *ctheory.net*, <http://www.ctheory.net/articles.aspx?id=677>



Fig. 1

The atmospheric lighting preceding Omar's meeting with Brother Mouzone.



Fig. 2

The low-angled, Mexican-standoff composition.



Fig. 3

Mayor Royce talks about reform, but the font size on his poster tells the real story.

conditions of the drug trade, foreshadowing the Hamsterdam storyline. The design of the banner announcing the demolition offers a visual metaphor regarding the political world that will be introduced in the season, as the contrast between the font size of Mayor Royce's (Glynn Turman) name and 'the citizens of Baltimore' indicates that the project is far more about producing positive publicity and acclaim for the politician than for the people he ostensibly serves (fig. 3). The final images of abrasive clouds of dust and grime engulfing the eager spectators also suggest a pronounced ambiguity regarding the benefits of such actions, and the possibility of unpleasant, unplanned consequences.

The fourth season cold open is less expansive and dramatic, and involves Snoop (Felicia Pearson) and a salesman discussing the relative merits of nail guns (highly significant because it will be used to entomb Marlo's enemies in vacant houses, which will drive the plot for the fourth and fifth seasons)²³². Despite the obvious differences between the middle-aged, white salesman and the tattooed, black gangster, the two converse as equals and exchange information based on their own backgrounds and knowledge. Snoop then takes the new nail-gun back to the car where Chris (Gbenga Akinnagbe) is waiting and proceeds to pass on to him the information she has just learnt, although she modifies certain aspects to fit more comfortably with her and Chris' frame of reference ("Man say if you want to shoot nails this here's the Cadillac, man. He mean Lexus but he ain't know it"). Most notably this scene develops character (Snoop has had very little presence in the series up to this point), while also alerting the audience to the importance that the nail gun will hold in upcoming episodes. It also acts as the first scene of teaching in a season that will focus not only on schools but on the whole idea of education in an environment which is so heavily influenced by the drug trade and its consequences. Repeatedly throughout the series the audience will be presented with instances of effective teaching where real-world conditions and examples are used to engage and educate, and instances of bad

²³² For further analysis of this scene, see Robert LeVertis Bell, 'Precarious Lunch: Conviviality and Postlapsarian Nostalgia in *The Wire*'s Fourth Season', *Criticism*, Vol. 52, No. 3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 529-546.

teaching which emphasise rote learning and a curriculum devoid of context or awareness of the lives lived by the characters. Snoop's animation and her ability to demonstrate what she has learned to her partner in crime are used to indicate the importance of engagement in learning, and primes the audience to identify the many other cases where similar student-teacher exchanges occur.

Finally, in the fifth season, the cold open involves Bunk (Wendell Pierce) and several other homicide detectives tricking a murder suspect into believing that a photocopier is a lie-detector, and using this to draw a confession out of him. Since the season involves McNulty and Freamon creating a fake serial killer in order to funnel money into their clandestine surveillance of Marlo, and a journalist fabricating stories to advance his career, the fakery in this scene alerts the audience to the importance of deception and different definitions of truth in the upcoming episodes. The dialogue in this scene is particularly loaded with lines that comment on the credulity of Americans in relation to authority ("Americans are stupid people by and large. We pretty much believe whatever we're told."), and anticipates the serial-killer plot ("The bigger the lie, the more they believe."). The use of cold opens to indicate the thematic terrain of the upcoming season is particularly relevant when considering the importance of the drug war to *The Wire* as a whole. These cold opens undermine the argument of those inclined to downplay the importance of the police procedural side of the series, since in every opening the only featured characters are either police (season 1, season 2, season 5) or drug dealers (season 3, season 4). If *The Wire* really were foregrounding the institution introduced in each successive season, one might expect that these scenes would more directly reference the new setting, instead of just being alluded to. The fact that this is not the case emphasises that the series really is overwhelmingly about prohibition and the drug trade, with the various additional institutions remaining important to the story only as long as they engage with the drug gangs or police.

Hamsterdam: The Modest Experiment

Despite the prevalence of the idea that the first season of *The Wire* is where the principal argument about the inefficacy of the War on Drugs is made, it is actually the third season that sees the most sustained and complete criticism of prohibition as a philosophy. It centres on Hamsterdam, where the illegal market in drugs has been legalised in derelict and abandoned sections of West Baltimore, allowing the series to address a plethora of prohibition-related issues. Lance McMillian has provided an exhaustive account of the various conditions that are presented in *The Wire* as factors which govern the plausibility of Hamsterdam from an economic supply and demand perspective. Rightly treating the Hamsterdam storyline as a polemical hypothesis about the cause and effect chain that would emerge were such a strategy pursued in reality, McMillian references scores of scholarly works that provide apparently solid evidence that the conditions which prevail within *The Wire* have a strong basis in existing economic analysis of illicit market forces. As with many of the best sociological and philosophical scholarly analyses of *The Wire*, McMillian takes the text itself as a starting point for offering instruction on subject matter relevant to his discipline. What makes McMillian's account exceptional is the rigour with which he attends to the text of the programme and how little he relies on paratexts such as statements from David Simon. The conclusions he draws are relatively simple and substantially supported;

1. Markets arise wherever there exists market demand.
2. Legalization and regulation, not prohibition, represent the best method for controlling the negative externalities of fringe markets.
3. Mustering the political will to provide legal sanction to the fringe economy is a difficult, if not impossible task.²³³

²³³ Lance McMillian, 'Drug Markets, Fringe Markets, and the Lessons of Hamsterdam', *Washington and Lee Law Review*, 69:2 (2012), pp. 849-850.

Assessing the correctness of McMillian's conclusions is not within the purview of this research, and however convincing the argument made about the plausibility of Hamsterdam, it can never overcome *The Wire*'s status as fiction. What needs to be addressed here is how three fairly simple arguments about market forces are specifically articulated to the audience as part of an already established fully-serialised narrative. As McMillian writes, the value of storytelling in this context is that "by observing how the power of law affects characters whom they have come to know and care about, viewers move beyond the four corners of theory to the more dynamic and affecting experience of seeing law play out in a way that is personally meaningful to them"²³⁴.

While *The Wire* as a whole presents a powerful and expansive polemic against the War on Drugs, the Hamsterdam storyline is the most ambitious and the most theoretical. Unlike other aspects of the anti-prohibition arguments being made in the series, Hamsterdam cannot be understood as the result of actual experience, since there is no comparative real-world example that can serve as a template. Consequently the depiction of Hamsterdam stands as a 'what if?' argument about how drug legalisation might work at the street level, utilising the series' centrifugally complex serial narrative to gradually craft a coherent account of cause and effect across the third season. While McMillian suggests that the account presented by *The Wire*'s creators is supported by a significant body of scholarship, this is essentially irrelevant for the show's audience because their interests and expectations extend beyond questions of accuracy. Plausibility is the real goal, because the hypothetical setting of Hamsterdam, and the arguments it raises about prohibition, can only work for the audience if it is as convincing as the rest of the series, which is presented as realistic and based on the personal, real-world experiences of its co-creators. The series weaves the Hamsterdam storyline seamlessly into the narrative as whole, using aspects of character, plot, mise-en-scène and performance to progress the story incrementally. Hamsterdam is not a project of grand reform (like the one trumpeted by Mayor

²³⁴ Ibid., 852-853.

Royce in the season 3 cold open) but one where the characters attempt small-scale modifications aimed at achieving compassionate but modest goals. Having spent two seasons meticulously representing the War on Drugs as an ineffective, destructive and futile endeavour, the series pivots and offers a ‘what if?’ representation of how things could be better if the prohibition on the sale and use of drugs was lifted.

Two characters are central to any understanding of how the series is able to make the Hamsterdam storyline plausible: Major Colvin and Sergeant Carver. Colvin is clearly the central figure, as it is he who introduces the reform (for which he is subsequently punished) and functions as the mouthpiece for the arguments made in its favour. The Deacon (Melvin Williams) is Colvin's confidant, and their relationship creates an ongoing discussion about what could and should be done to address the problems faced by the community. Carver has been part of the series from the beginning, but his relevance to the Hamsterdam plot stems from his position as Colvin's sergeant and as the character that grows increasingly convinced that Colvin's plan is effective and worth defending.

Colvin first appears in season two (s02e09) responding to the aftermath of a gunfight between the Barksdale organisation and another gang, during which a nine year-old is killed by a stray bullet. In the three brief scenes in which he appears, Colvin exudes a world-weary exasperation with the situation in which he finds himself, and the knowledge that the response to it will be ineffective. Nothing else is seen of Colvin in this season, so the only impression of him that the audience has (if any) when the third season begins comes from these scenes of frustration – an emotion likely to be shared by the audience at this point in the series if they are inclined to accept the account of prohibition being presented to them. From his very earliest moments, Colvin is positioned as a potential audience proxy, and one of the very few senior police officials who seems to view the casualties of the drug trade as a genuine tragedy, rather than an inconvenience that might affect their chances of promotion or political favour.

Colvin's anger and frustration in the face of tragedy will be reanimated in the third season following the shooting of Officer Dozerman (Rick Otto) in a low-level drug bust gone wrong (s03e02). Dozerman became part of the Major Crimes Unit in the second season, so he occupies a useful position in terms of audience familiarity – he is not part of the central group of characters, but is more than just a random police officer. Unlike the shooting of Greggs (Sonja Sohn) in the first season, the shooting of Dozerman is distinctly anticlimactic, shot with a still camera in ELS with no cuts, so as to downplay any anticipation or suspense and instead emphasise the routineness of the act and the pointlessness of the violence (fig. 4). It is this event that acts as the emotional and narrative catalyst for *Hamsterdam*, as is indicated by a scene between Colvin and the Deacon that occurs at the Deacon's church the day after the shooting;

Colvin: Here's the thing, six months from now I'm gone. I put in my thirty, the only thing that's gonna be left of me on that job is an eight by eleven framed picture in the Western hallway. But you know what, the shit out there, the city? It's worse than when I first came on, so what does that say about me, about my life?

Deacon: Oh come on man, you talking about drugs. That's a force of nature. That's sweeping leaves on a windy day whoever the hell you are. You fought the good fight.

The composition of this scene gives greater depth to the conversation taking place by using the location of crucifixes in the room as a means of tacitly endorsing the sentiments that Colvin is expressing. The scene takes place in the back room of the Deacon's church, so the appearance of the crucifixes appears to be nothing out of the ordinary. However, their positioning is relevant. In the opening shot the frame within the frame draws the audience's attention to the central figures and their surroundings – in particular the beam of light coming through the small window, and the crucifix on the wall above Colvin's head (fig. 5). The scene then plays out as a series of MCU and CU of the men talking, and in one of the shots of Colvin another crucifix, on a different wall, appears behind his head (fig. 6). The crucifixes surround Colvin rather than the

Deacon, the actual man of God, inviting the suggestion that it is Colvin, and his frustration with the current state of affairs, who is on the side of the angels. When the Deacon tries to dismiss Colvin's depression by calling drugs a force of nature, the camera moves in the typical slow tracking motion that is a staple of the show's aesthetic. Yet when the shot cuts back to Colvin for the end of the scene, the camera is static once again and Colvin does not respond to the Deacon's speech, he just looks at him inscrutably. The fact that the camera starts moving on the Deacon's words and stops again with Colvin gives a sense that there is a separation between the two men. Colvin may not rebuff the sentiment of the Deacon, but his failure to respond seems to indicate he does not accept it either, and as we see in the next but one scene, Colvin has made his decision that he must do something to try and fix the problems.

In creating Hamsterdam, Colvin is shown as having little to lose and much to gain. As his conversation with the Deacon shows, he feels he has nothing to show for his thirty years' service in terms of his effect on the community or his own self esteem. He feels he can afford to act now as he is on the point of leaving the force and has the security of having a job with Johns Hopkins University lined up once he does so. This point is emphasised by having Colvin repeatedly assert that he is only a few months away from his 'thirty' – the point where he not only leaves the police force but becomes entitled to a pension increase after thirty years of service. The crucifix *mise-en-scène* described above not only indicates that his mission is a righteous one, but also foreshadows his downfall when Colvin loses his Johns Hopkins job and some of his pension as punishment for his altruism. Any implication that Colvin has a messiah complex is negated by the inclusion of COMSTAT meetings in the third season, in which district commanders are hauled over the coals by Rawls for failing to adequately manipulate crime statistics to meet the Mayor's publicity needs. While the problems associated with 'joking the stats' have been well-established at this point in the series, seeing inside the COMSTAT meetings offers more context for Colvin's decision by contrasting Rawls and Burrell's desire to reduce crime for the benefit of the mayor with Colvin's desire to reduce crime for the benefit of



Fig. 4

The calculatedly muted shooting of Dozerman.



Fig. 5

The crucifix above Colvin expresses his decency and righteousness.



Fig. 6

Colvin and another crucifix.

the inhabitants of his district. His actions are thus shown to stem from a genuine desire to improve his district in the time he has left, and to possibly serve as a demonstration of a new strategy for dealing with the negative consequences of prohibition.

This idea is given additional emphasis in the cold open to s03e04, wherein Colvin is attending a community meeting where a police spokesman is laying out the official line on how crime is getting better in the area (conveyed using charts of statistics, naturally) – an idea with which many members of the audience are dissenting²³⁵. One woman stands and outlines her objections;

Woman: My kids, they can't play outside no more. Some nights when we hear these pops, we got to sleep under our beds. I come home from work I can't even get up my front steps 'cause they occupied by the drug dealers. Is that in that picture you got up there?

It is this enquiry that prompts Colvin to speak, and when he does so it is to sympathise with the woman, but also to effectively admit that there isn't anything substantive that the police can do to change things. Colvin echoes the woman's criticism of the police statistics by saying "we show you charts and statistics like they mean something, but you're going back to your home tonight, we're gonna be in our patrol cars, and them boys still gonna be out there on them corners, deep in the game". Colvin aligns himself with the residents of his district rather than with the police force, while also repeatedly underlining the vacuity of manicured statistics when confronted with the lived experience those statistics ostensibly describe. Both the woman in the audience and Colvin scorn the official statistics being presented by the police spokesman and speak eloquently of the day-to-day misery that numbers cannot convey. This scene has an additional purpose that is only discernible much later in the season (s03e11), when at a similar community meeting the complaints have shifted from the menace of the drug trade to the more prosaic and humble complaints of noisy scooters and the technicalities of establishing a

²³⁵ One of the dissenters mentions that his cousin 'Willie Gant' came forward to testify for the police and ended up dead – a reference to the murder that ends the pilot episode of *The Wire*.

sidewalk snowball stand. Here again a woman rises from the audience to address the police spokesman, but this time she is not complaining but instead is expressing gratitude that community policing has returned to her neighbourhood because the police no longer spend every waking moment chasing drug dealers. Once again statistics are side-lined in favour of the testimony of ordinary citizens, but this time it is to indicate how much things have improved instead of how bad they have become.

The woman at the later community meeting also essentially confirms an idea that Colvin has put to Carver in the previous episode (s03e10), namely that the worst thing about the drug war from Colvin's perspective is that it ruined the job of being a police officer. Colvin takes Carver to task for his failings as a policeman, even though he is clearly one of the better officers Colvin has under his command, and attributes Carver's failings to a more general decline in American policing. Colvin tells him that the problem with the drug war is that "when you're at war, you need a fucking enemy, and pretty soon damn near everybody on every corner's your fucking enemy. And soon the neighbourhood that you're supposed to be policing, that's just occupied territory". This is an explicit assertion of what has previously been implied through action, but it comes at a point where it seems less polemical because Hamsterdam has already been shown to be effective, so Colvin's wisdom and insight in creating it has already been significantly validated by the narrative. The placement of the community meeting in the next scene also helps to establish Colvin's acumen by having the audience member outline the massive improvement in community policing that has been brought about by Hamsterdam. These scenes are constructed so as to make the success of Hamsterdam feel indisputable, thus potentially engendering anger, resentment and frustration when the timidity and myopia of the city's political elite results in its destruction. Colvin becomes a martyr for his cause, denied his thirty year bonus, demoted from the rank of Major, and then informed that Johns Hopkins has retracted the job offer due to the controversy that stemmed from his actions. This neatly sets up the conditions that drive Colvin to become involved with the school programme in season four –

another effective and worthwhile attempt at reform than will ultimately be crushed by the institution it was attempting to improve.

One of the keys to making the Hamsterdam storyline appear plausible within the established storyworld is the way that *The Wire* keeps Colvin's ambitions for the project very limited, both in terms of time and desired outcome, in contrast to the kind of grandiloquent reform trumpeted by Mayor Royce and later by Tommy Carcetti. Colvin is not chasing political glory but personal peace – he wants to leave the police force feeling like he actually achieved something in his career, rather than overseeing a rising tide of drugs that has flooded whole sections of the city. The criteria he uses to establish success are rooted firmly in the lived daily experience of the citizens of his district, which is why the community meetings are so important in anchoring the start and end of the experiment. However, despite clearly being on the side of the angels, Colvin is still shown to possess significant flaws in his attitude to the Hamsterdam project and its desired outcomes. The fact that his ambitions are so modest means that the audience can accept their accomplishment more readily than if Colvin really wanted to achieve grand, sweeping reform across the entire city or state. Along with the modesty of his ambitions, Colvin is also shown to be somewhat myopic about the consequences of his actions, necessitating that other characters also take some credit and responsibility for the success of Hamsterdam as it develops. This is best indicated by the second scene between Colvin and the Deacon – once again utilising the device of twinned scenes that provide the audience with obvious points of contrast.

The second meeting between the two men comes six episodes after the first (s03e08) and follows on from Colvin proudly showing the Deacon the positive effects of Hamsterdam, followed by a trip to the free zones themselves. Colvin is currently somewhat intoxicated by the drop in crime that Hamsterdam has produced, yet the Deacon seems less thrilled about the conditions prevailing there, asking rhetorically “what in God's name did you do here?”. The question recalls the location of the earlier conversation, and the following scene in Colvin's

office mirrors elements of the setting in a number of significant ways. Strong daylight pouring through the window provides a visual link between the two scenes, although in this one the positions have switched both physically (Colvin on the left of frame, the Deacon on the right) and thematically (fig. 7). Whereas in the first scene it was Colvin who could not abide the conditions of the status quo, here it is the Deacon who refuses to accept the rose-tinted vision of Hamsterdam that Colvin has, due to its success in lowering the crime rate.

The Deacon tells Colvin that Hamsterdam is “a great village of pain and you’re the mayor”, before going on to ask him “where’s your drinking water, where’s your toilets, your heat, your electricity, where’s the needle truck, the condom distribution, the drug treatment intake?”. In a reversal of the earlier scene, the Deacon refuses to accept Colvin’s appraisal of how things are. Rejecting Colvin’s protests that as a police major he cannot do more than he has already done, or that the inhabitants of Hamsterdam are no worse off materially than they already were, the Deacon begins to mobilise the unofficial do-gooders of Baltimore to step up to the challenge of improving Hamsterdam, and by the end of the episode all of the deficiencies the Deacon listed are being overcome²³⁶.

The mise-en-scène of this scene also contains a significant icon. On this occasion it is not a crucifix but a pair of boxing gloves hanging on Colvin’s coat stand (fig. 8). This item links the Deacon’s involvement with Colvin and Hamsterdam to his other storyline in the episode, which

²³⁶ It is worth briefly noting that John Atlas and Peter Drier, two of the most prominent sociological critics of *The Wire*, have condemned the series for only showing the bleak, pessimistic side of urban inequality without acknowledging the various charities and community organisations that strive to improve the lot of Baltimore’s poor and disaffected. Moreover they have claimed that “*The Wire* failed to offer viewers any understanding that the problems facing cities and the urban poor are solvable”, yet despite writing two articles supposedly demonstrating this claim, at no point do they mention the Hamsterdam storyline (they barely quote from the text at all). Yet the Hamsterdam storyline clearly presents the viewer with a sustained argument about the way in which improvements could be effectively made, and all through the efforts of the kind of organisations they advocate in their articles – NGOs looking to mobilise willing and able local people to improve the lot of their fellow citizens. The fact that the harm reduction programs disappear when the police and politicians shut Hamsterdam down could be said to be cynical, or it could be viewed as completely accurate – that is a matter of individual perspective. But the suggestion that *The Wire* offers no demonstration that the problems it depicts are solvable is to seemingly discount what actually takes place in the series for the sake of a soapbox. [John Atlas and Peter Drier, ‘*The Wire* – Bush-Era Fable About America’s Urban Poor?’, *City and Community*, 8:3 (September 2009), p. 332].

involves Cutty's (Chad L. Coleman) attempt to find something he can do outside of the game. Cutty tells the Deacon that "it ain't about me doing for me, I don't think. It might need to be about more than that", an impulse that swiftly leads to the idea of the boxing gym whose construction has begun by the episode's end. The visual connection between Colvin and Cutty emphasises the quality that those two men share, namely the desire to achieve something positive that is about more than just self-interest. The difference ends up being that Colvin attempts large-scale change from within an institution, whereas Cutty's attempt is made on a much smaller scale and exists in the space between the institutions of the city. Colvin is doomed to fail, as happens again in the fourth season when he becomes part of a programme aimed at improving the education system – another attempt doomed to fail because of its position within the system it is trying to reform. Colvin's only real achievement comes once he moves outside of the system, reaching out through Cutty's friendship with Wee Bey (Hassan Johnson) in order to obtain permission to adopt Namond and provide him with a life that leads away from the street and the game. The final glimpse we have of Colvin in series five (s05e09) shows that this last, unofficial, reform has succeeded – Namond is competing in a debate tournament and has clearly effloresced into an excellent scholar with a bright future ahead of him. Like Colvin, Cutty's appearance in season five is a brief one, but it is enough for the audience to see that the gym has succeeded. Thanks to Avon's \$15,000 donation and the assistance provided by the Deacon's religious and political contacts, something good has been able to grow in the cracks of the city.

Aside from Colvin, the character who offers the easiest point of audience allegiance in relation to Hamsterdam is Sergeant Carver. While initially sceptical, Carver gradually becomes as great a champion of the experiment as Colvin, to the point where he actually moves a murder victim's body out of Hamsterdam so that homicide detectives will not learn of its existence. Carver's position at this point in the series makes him ideally suited to take on this role, since he is shown



Fig. 7

Colvin meets with the Deacon again.



Fig. 8

Boxing gloves replace crucifixes in the mise-en-scene.



Fig. 9

The usual composition of Stringer when he meets Avon in prison.

to be motivated by a sense of loyalty to Colvin and a desire to show him the kind of support Colvin gives his troops. This is a shrewd motivation, since it plays on the fact that in the first season Carver betrays Lieutenant Daniels (Lance Reddick) by passing information about the Major Crimes Unit to Commissioner Burrell (Frankie Faison) in order to secure career promotion. Having profited from disloyalty before, Carver is shown to be determinedly loyal to Colvin to make up for his previous transgression, providing ample context for his character growth over the course of the third season and beyond. Consequently, Carver seems like less of an anti-prohibition activist or vexed reformer than Colvin, so his interventions in the running of Hamsterdam do not come across as didactic or calculated. Instead, Carver is portrayed as a conscientious employee dedicated to the success of his boss' plan and responding to emerging problems from a purely practical and common sense perspective. Hamsterdam is not a grand scheme that has a range of pre-planned options for dealing with whatever contingencies arise. It is a project which stems from personal frustration rather than intellectual contemplation, and which is realised by muddling through. The fact that there are so many initial problems is essential for making the storyline convincing and for avoiding any sense that it is a polemic being shoehorned into a fictional drama.

Had Colvin predicted the consequences arising from Hamsterdam early on in the season, the risk would have been that when those predictions came true, they would make the story feel too contrived or schematic for it to fit comfortably into the realist register of the series as a whole. Unlike other significant events that occur in the season (such as Avon and Stringer's betrayals of one another) the audience does not possess more information than the characters. Initially the problems are logistical. The corner boys are too disorderly and rebellious to be properly reasoned with, so Colvin goes up the chain to the middle management of crew chiefs like Bodie, who listen to his proposition and appreciate the potential benefits. When the crews threaten to leave Hamsterdam because there are no customers, Carver uses his initiative and his rank to

make his colleagues provide police transportation to take drug addicts off of the corners and into the free zones. When it transpires that one of the supposedly abandoned row houses in the free zones is still occupied, Colvin manipulates the police bureaucracy in order to find the occupant a new home.

These logistical challenges prove reasonably easy to resolve using the power the police have at their disposal, particularly given that they are dealing only with drug dealers and users, who are their natural constituency. Even very early on, the weekly statistics seem to indicate that the movement of the drug gangs into the free zone is having an appreciable impact on crime in Colvin's district. However, once the free zones are up and running, a new set of problems emerges. This is when Carver's role becomes more pronounced. Arriving at Hamsterdam one morning (s03e07), Carver, Herc (Domenick Lombardozzi) and Colicchio (Benjamin Busch) survey the scene and summarise how the situation has developed:

Carver: Too many damn children.

Colicchio: What do you need lookouts and runners for if the shit is legal? A lot of them have been cut loose by the dealers.

Herc: It's like one of those nature shows. You mess with the environment some species get fucked out of their habitat.

Immediately following this exchange, Carver confronts one of the crew bosses about their abandonment of their juvenile workforce. In response to the dealer's complete lack of concern, Carver takes it upon himself to institute a new rule for Hamsterdam; every crew must now pay \$100 a week for the privilege of being allowed to sell in the free zone. Later Carver (having purchased a basketball hoop and stand for the unemployed children) collects the money from the crew chiefs and lays down his new rule;

Carver: ...use it to pay them hoppers for the week, whether you use them or not, you pay this money out. This shit is like unemployment insurance, every employer gotta pay in. If I find out anybody been holding out then he's out of here, back in the street getting his head busted. The least y'all can do is look after your own people a little bit.

Herc: What are you, a fucking Communist?

Herc's semi-serious question highlights the rhetorical strategy being utilised in this scene and others like it – while Carver's actions clearly have an ideological aspect (he is essentially establishing his own version of the welfare state within the fiefdom of Hamsterdam), they are presented as stemming from a pragmatic and humanistic response to the conditions that the free zones are creating. Rather than following a grand scheme of 'how things should be', Colvin, Carver and the Deacon are shown to be responding to 'how things are'. Common sense, rather than political or ideological conviction, is presented as being the dominant concern of those striving to make the Hamsterdam experiment successful.

As Fredric Jameson has noted, Hamsterdam is at its heart a utopian project – a vision of how things could be better, conveyed with sufficient nuance and detail that it feels both plausible and desirable²³⁷. For this reason, when the experiment is finally brought to a close and all the positive outcomes it produced are swept away in favour of easy political point-scoring, the effect on the viewer is far more impactful. The sense of frustration with the state of politics-as-usual that this creates has the potential to be particularly powerful because the series depicts the Hamsterdam model as effective, yet this fact still cannot overcome the obstacles of political cowardice and self-interest. Coming after two seasons-worth of examples that cumulatively demonstrate how detrimental prohibition is for the communities of West Baltimore, Hamsterdam becomes a glimpse of something not only better, but achievable. By aligning the viewer with characters who prioritise real-world impact over political convenience or

²³⁷ Fredric Jameson, 'Realism and Utopia in *The Wire*', *Criticism*, 52:3-4 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 371-372.

institutional authority, the series offers a possible basis for allegiance in the case of those viewers whose experience of the series to some degree mirrors Colvin's and Carver's. Having used earlier seasons to establish the problems Hamsterdam is attempting to overcome, the series aligns the viewer with characters who are conflicted and frustrated about those same conditions, and then slowly shows them confronting, adapting to and overcoming these problems. Having demonstrated that reform is actually possible, the series is able to re-emphasise how intractable the political structure is and how low a priority systemic reform actually is, regardless of its desirability. By offering the viewer a vision of a better world, only to snatch it away, *The Wire* establishes that the negative consequences of drug prohibition are not so intractable that they can't be overcome, but that the broader institutional forces are too well-established and too reliant on individual self-interest to allow real change to occur. Individuals are shown to be the basis of actual, meaningful improvements, so long as they are operating on the margins of their institutions – it is only once the institution takes control that reform flounders.

The Drug Dealers: Avon, Stringer, Marlo

The previous section showed how the Hamsterdam storyline is constructed as an invitation for sympathetic viewers to reach unflattering conclusions about the current state of drug prohibition in a way that seems intuitive and non-didactic. In this section, the focus is on the series' three major drug dealers; Avon Barksdale, Stringer Bell and Marlo Stanfield. Unlike the Hamsterdam storyline, these three characters all inhabit multiple seasons of the show, allowing their storylines to shift and develop. While the characters do not experience significant change, the conditions under which they operate do (Avon goes to prison, the towers are demolished), and this provides the opportunity for each kingpin to react to the changing circumstances, pointing up the differences between them and, by extension, their diverging conceptions of the conditions prevailing within the drug trade.

The thematic and structural purposes served by the kingpins are not static, but shift according to the focus of each season and the longer story arcs. In the first season, Stringer and Avon are shown to possess distinct personalities, but their relationship has none of the fissures that begin to appear in the following two seasons. The first season is focused on introducing the audience to the status quo of the War on Drugs, and explaining some of the institutional failings that make the police overzealous yet ineffectual. At this point Stringer and Avon work harmoniously because their larger thematic purpose is to demonstrate how a cautious and well-run drug gang operates, and the challenges and frustrations this creates for the police attempting to bring high-level dealers to justice. Having provided the audience with a solid grounding in the workings of the drug trade and police surveillance, the scope of the story is able to expand and demonstrate how far-reaching and intertwined an issue prohibition is. This is done partly by including the story of an international drug trafficker, 'The Greek' (Bill Raymond), which links the local drug trade to the global black market, and also by having Stringer begin to incorporate his economics education into the running of the Barksdale drug organisation.

The second season adds further detail to the portrayal of prohibition, acknowledging the global scale of the practice while also emphasising the market-based nature of the drug trade. Avon and Stringer begin to fall out, which creates dramatic tension but also clearly establishes the different outlooks each character has, giving the audience different perspectives from which to consider the workings of the illicit marketplace. These tensions and divisions are heightened in the third season following the demolition of the towers and the loss of the Barksdale territory, the establishment of the Co-Op and the conflict between the Barksdale and Stanfield gangs. As both Stringer and Avon retreat further into their respective corners, the balance that made their organisation so effective in the first seasons is destroyed, and their betrayals of one another throw their differences into stark relief. Stringer's infatuation with legitimate capitalism blinds him to the street-level concerns regarding reputation and behaviour, and those are precisely the reasons why Avon feels compelled to hand him over to Mouzone. Conversely, Avon's pride and

determination to deal with Marlo through force blinds him to the damage he is doing to his organisation as a whole, risking the high-quality drug connection provided by the Co-Op in order to maintain his reputation. Knowing that the organisation cannot hope to compete without the best quality drugs, Stringer is driven to betray Avon for the sake of the business. Having each of them betray the other provides a basis for comparing and contrasting the reasons behind each decision, allowing conclusions about the nature of the drug trade and the functioning of prohibited markets to be drawn.

At first, in the third season, Marlo's role is simply to be the spanner in the works for the Co-Op – the only significant hold-out who has the muscle to strike out on his own and draw the attention of Avon. However, by the fourth season it is Marlo who is carrying the major plot lines relating to the drug trade, which focus on his rise to power on the back of Chris and Snoop's covert lethality. The tyrannical grip that Marlo extends over the neighbourhoods of West Baltimore powerfully demonstrates how effective murder can be when employed in a prohibited market. Marlo uses it as his principal (indeed, only) strategy for dealing with competition. He minimises what would otherwise be intense police interest both by having Chris and Snoop inter the bodies in abandoned row houses, and generally acting with such ruthlessness that no-one in the community dares pass on to the police any information about the murders. While character change on *The Wire* is often limited, this is particularly true with Marlo, who is not even afforded much character elaboration – his personal history and motivations are kept almost entirely ambiguous. Marlo's unchanging nature makes him thematically and metaphorically valuable, as he and his organisation demonstrate the power of violence in a prohibited market and how difficult it is to prosecute someone that the community fears far more than the police.

Stringer and Avon: Business and The Street

Of *The Wire*'s three principal drug dealers, Stringer Bell has received by far the most scholarly attention, focused on his attempts throughout the first three seasons to effectively reform the Baltimore drug trade based on the principles of legitimate capitalism²³⁸. As later chapters will demonstrate in more detail, American gangster stories are often used to draw critical parallels between the business practices of legitimate capitalism and those of illicit markets. Stringer Bell's story is in this tradition, although Stringer is somewhat atypical because the series makes the comparison between the licit and illicit economies a conspicuous feature of his character arc, rather than a subtext. This is most obviously indicated by the fact that in the first season Stringer is shown attending a community college class in economics, and later passing on his newly-acquired knowledge to his subordinates. This side of Stringer is a relatively minor one in the first season, but following Avon's imprisonment, Stringer gains control of the Barksdale organisation and begins to restructure it so that it functions more like a legitimate business, taking this to extremes like insisting on following Robert's Rules of Order in their meetings. By the third season Stringer has successfully established the New Day Co-Op, bringing together Baltimore's most prominent drug traffickers to offer better quality drugs at lower prices, and providing a forum for different gangs to air and settle grievances without resorting to violence.

Avon is already the top dog by the time the series begins, and it is made reasonably explicit that his success was due to his ferocity in driving out his competitors and taking over the most valuable territory. Once he goes to prison at the end of the first season, he no longer exercises as much influence on the daily running of his organisation. Stringer becomes dominant, and cracks start to emerge in their partnership which brings the contrasting philosophies of the two partners into relief. Avon came to prominence by what might be called a conventional approach to the

²³⁸ See, for example, Ernest L. Gibson, 'For Whom the BELL tolls: *The Wire*'s Stringer Bell as a Tragic Intellectual', *Americana* 10: 1 (Spring 2011), <http://www.americanpopularculture.com/journal/articles/spring_2011/gibson.htm>; Mark Anthony Neal, "'A Man without a Country': The Boundaries of Legibility, Social Capital, and Cosmopolitan Masculinity", *Criticism* 52: 3 (Summer/Fall 2010), pp. 399-411.

drug trade, whereas Stringer's is a more dispassionate and original approach. In many ways, Avon represents the mould that Stringer is attempting to break. Particularly on an initial viewing, Avon can be seen mostly as an obstacle preventing the visionary Stringer from carrying out reforms that might mitigate the worst consequences of the drug trade. Avon's concerns regarding territory, reputation, codes of conduct, and retaliation for past wrongs often seem irrelevant or trivial, but as the second and third seasons develop, some of the logic behind his preoccupations becomes more discernible and significant. A powerful early demonstration of the growing divide between the two men comes in s02e12, when Stringer comes to see Avon in prison following the shooting of Brother Mouzone, which Stringer orchestrated in direct opposition to Avon's wishes.

The scene begins with the camera tracking towards Avon as he sits on one side of the prison glass expressing his dissatisfaction with the fact that Mouzone allowed himself to be ambushed in his own motel room. The movement of the camera brings Stringer into the frame until the frame consists of a MS of Avon from the back and side, with Stringer sitting face-on talking to him. There is then a counter shot with the same composition but this time looking over Stringer's shoulder at Avon. Despite being separated by glass, these early shots keep the two men together, with both of their bodies taking up a substantial amount of the frame (fig. 9&10). As Avon begins to discuss what their next course of action should be, the shot cuts to a CU of his face and then Stringer's CU counter shot. Now each man dominates his own CU, although the edges of the frame still contain the back of their partner's head (fig. 11). Having the shot-reverse-shot move closer into the actors' faces emphasises the emotional responses that each character experiences during the following exchange of dialogue.

Avon: Now if the word get out on the street that we weak like this how the fuck are we meant to maintain our shit?

Stringer: I know, but we gotta hit right back, make a statement, but Mouzone not saying who did that shit.

Avon: You asked him who it was?

Stringer: Yeah I asked him.

Avon: Why?!

Stringer: Why what?

Avon: How you gonna ask a soldier like Mouzone a question like that? Either he gonna say, or he gonna go and work it out. Either way you ain't got to be asking him shit!

Stringer: Man, every market based business runs in cycles and we going through a down cycle right now.

Avon: String, this ain't about your motherfucking business class either. It ain't that part of it. It's that other thing. The street is the street, always.

As Avon says 'String', the shot changes to a new angle and distance; Avon's face is framed in profile and in an extreme close up so that only his face is contained within the frame (fig. 12). The shot then reverses to Stringer shot in the same way (fig. 13). Whereas the two men had previously occupied every shot together, this new composition isolates them from one another. This separation also occurs in the dialogue – instead of the collective 'we', Avon has turned to criticizing Stringer and the mode of address becomes 'you'. The visual solidarity between the two partners has been broken because their different philosophies and priorities have now come to the surface, foreshadowing the end of the next season.

Of the roughly ten scenes that take place in the prison visiting room, only one other has a moment like this where the standard aesthetic template is altered to completely isolate the two



Fig. 10

The reverse shot of Stringer and Avon.



Fig. 11

Close-up on Avon, with Stringer still in frame.



Fig. 12

Close-up on Avon, with Stringer excluded.



Fig. 13

Close-up on Stringer, with Avon excluded.



Fig. 14

Close-up on Avon, following D'Angelo's death.



Fig. 15

Close-up on Stringer, the architect of D'Angelo's death.



Fig. 16

Stringer extends his fist to Avon.



Fig. 17

Avon reciprocates the gesture.



Fig. 18

Stringer makes eye contact with Avon.



Fig. 19

Stringer's disembodied fist reaches out to Avon.



Fig. 20

Avon avoids making eye-contact with Stringer.



Fig. 21

Avon reciprocates grudgingly and in disembodied close-up.

speakers from one another. It comes in the episode following D'Angelo's (Lawrence Gilliard Jr.) apparent suicide (s02e07), and occurs at the moment when Stringer and Avon are most emotionally distant – Avon stricken with guilt and a sense of responsibility for his nephew's death, Stringer attempting to provide comfort while also making sure that nobody suspects foul play (as it was Stringer who ordered the murder). On this occasion the deviation from the normal shot pattern (fig. 14&15) is fleeting and the usual configuration is re-established when Stringer extends his fist to the glass partition, prompting Avon to reciprocate the gesture of solidarity and fraternity that they repeat throughout the series, accompanied by the oath "us" (fig. 16&17). This same gesture acts as the conclusion to the later, more fractious meeting previously described, although on this occasion the shot is composed differently. While Stringer initiates the gesture (fig. 18), Avon takes a long moment to respond, and when he does it he fails to meet Stringer's gaze (fig. 19&20), and the touching of fists occurs in a disembodied close-up (fig. 21), rather than the medium two-shot normally used, further emphasising the emotional and mental distance between the two.

The disharmony in this scene between the two men acts as an indicator of the trajectory that the two characters will take over the course of the following season, until they reach the point where each betrays the other. Stringer asking Mouzone who shot him is a serious insult because it implies that Mouzone might not be capable of retaliating on his own terms, despite the fact that he has built a reputation on his capacity for violence and his stature as a 'soldier'. His ignorance of the nuances that govern the code of the streets is effectively established, yet Stringer does not learn from his error but continues to disregard those parts of the drug trade that do not have an obvious corollary in legitimate business. Despite his obvious intelligence and perception regarding the business side of the drug trade, Stringer is naively captivated by the myths of legitimate capitalism, and this leads him to denigrate the aspects of his trade that do not feature in his economics classes. As Jason Read writes, "Stringer has proven to be too good a student,

taking seriously capital's lessons about the virtues of the market"²³⁹ to the point where he believes that the logic of the market can overcome the essential nature of the business he is in. Stringer believes that by treating the illegal drug trade like any other business he can literally change the game – as long as everyone is made aware of the fact that the Co-Op provides the greatest financial benefit for all participants, harmony will be achieved through the fundamental motor of capitalism: individual self-interest.

To Stringer, and his East Baltimore counterpart Proposition Joe (Robert F. Chew), there is no reason why selling drugs should not be run like a legitimate business – “buy for a dollar, sell for two” as Joe puts it – especially because the main motivation for the police to pursue them is not the sale of drugs but the murders that result from gang disputes. As Stringer puts it at the first meeting of the Co-Op (s03e05), “Remember man, talk this shit up when you hit them bricks. Best way to get more involved is to tell people about the benefits of this here thing. No beefing, no drama, just business. Anybody got problems with anybody else here, we bring it to the group. We ain't gotta take it to the streets”. The problem with this system is that it can only work under certain conditions, namely that all other potential competitors accept the stipulations of the Co-Op, which is plausible only if the principal goal of those competitors is the accumulation of wealth. To those with the capitalist sensibility of Prop Joe and Stringer, the benefits that arise from participation in the Co-Op are far greater than the drawbacks and make membership an easy decision.

Stringer's desire to impose his system is what ultimately separates the utopianism of Colvin's *Hamsterdam* from that of Stringer and the Co-Op. As discussed above, Colvin's approach to reforming the drug trade is from the ground up, with adjustments being made as new problems arise, which helps draw the audience in and diminish the polemical nature of the *Hamsterdam* storyline. Stringer's establishment of the Co-Op is far more top-down in its approach, and his

²³⁹ Jason Read, 'Stringer Bell's Lament: Violence and Legitimacy in Contemporary Capitalism', in Potter and Marshall (eds.), *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television*, p. 133.

desire for the drug trade to be re-made in his own image blinds Stringer to any knowledge or evidence that seems to contradict his rose-tinted vision of running a legitimate capitalist business in an illegal market. Moreover, Colvin is primarily motivated by a sincere desire to make some discernible difference to the status quo before his retirement, which encourages him to be flexible and adaptive to the problems that arise. Not only is Stringer motivated by nothing more noble than greed, his entire system is predicated on the idea that greed is the only motivation anyone could possibly need. While both men attempt reform and are punished for it, Colvin's altruism and humanism means he is able to fight another day, whereas Stringer's misguided devotion to selfishness leads him blindly down a path that ends in his death.

Stringer and Avon's betrayals of one another really emphasise how the two characters function as manifestations of certain characteristics of the drug trade, and how inexorably they are intertwined. Stringer has no respect for the traditions of the street and the value of reputation, which causes him to betray Mouzone and set Omar on his trail, all for the sake of maintaining the territory-sharing arrangement with Prop Joe and keeping the supply of high-quality drugs intact. When Mouzone returns to Baltimore seeking vengeance, he discovers the truth about Stringer and goes to Avon to insist that Stringer must pay for this betrayal. Aware that Mouzone has every right to extract vengeance, Avon initially attempts to find a solution to the problem along the lines that Stringer will use when confronted by Omar and Mouzone an episode later (s03e11);

Avon: How can we fix it? You want money?

Mouzone: Money?

Avon: Yeah. This is business.

Mouzone: Business is where you are now. But what got you here is your word and your reputation. With that alone you've still got a line to New York. Without it, you're done.

In a business that often appears to be chaotic and disordered, the stability and certainty of an individual's reputation provides a degree of security against the vicissitudes of the prohibited marketplace. Due to the illegality of the drug trade and the severity of the punishments for engaging in it, trustworthiness is particularly valuable, so an individual's reputation can be hugely important. Stringer's naïve confidence in market forces and individual self-interest means that this is something he crucially fails to respect.

The parity between the reasons for Avon's betrayal and the reasons for Stringer's betrayal are made very apparent by having the two scenes intercut, so that Avon is with Mouzone at the same time that Stringer is talking to Colvin. The setting of the scene in a graveyard obviously foreshadows Stringer's fate, but the most notable moment occurs at the end of the scene after Stringer has handed over the address of Avon's hideout.

Colvin: Must have done something to you.

Stringer: Nah, it's just business.

Coming almost immediately after the dialogue between Avon and Mouzone quoted above, Stringer's line is particularly apposite because it is actually true. Avon is so entrenched in his war with Marlo that he cannot appreciate the fact that the Barksdale organisation is about to be cut out of Prop Joe's drug connection, because the conflict is bringing increased police attention for all the Co-Op drug dealers, exactly what they joined the Co-Op to avoid. Stringer's devotion to his alliance is so absolute, and his relationship with Avon so fraught, that he feels that sending Avon back to prison is the only course of action left open to him. Essentially each character is acting from the same desire to save the Barksdale organisation from the deleterious actions of their partner, but they approach the dilemma from opposite directions, failing to appreciate their own part in the crisis.

While Stringer's failings as a reformer result in his demise, the fact that Avon has a more comprehensive grasp of the rules governing the drug game does not make him necessarily more laudable or intelligent than Stringer. The collapse of the Barksdale drug organisation is a consequence of both men retreating too far into their world view, so that their relationship grows increasingly antagonistic and oppositional, rather than fraternal and complimentary. Stringer's business acumen allowed the Barksdale crew to adapt to changes in circumstances brought on by Omar, the Major Crimes Unit, the loss of their major supplier and range of more minor problems – and often this was due to Stringer finding a balance between his understanding of legitimate economics and the conditions that prevail in the prohibited drug market. Avon's reputation gave Stringer the cover he needed to experiment with different strategies for maximising profit potential, producing a highly successful and resolute symbiotic relationship. Stringer gradually distances himself from the street and begins to think of the drug trade as just another business. After his release, Avon plunges headfirst into the street warfare that established his reputation and grows more reckless as Marlo repeatedly outmanoeuvres him. But while Avon loses his freedom, his betrayal of Stringer means he keeps his reputation, allowing him to influence the action later in the series, and ensuring that he continues to receive preferential treatment in prison.

Marlo: Violence and the Crown

Early on it is established that, despite what Stringer might want to be the case, Marlo is not primarily interested in making money from the drug trade. Instead he simply wants to be number one, to sit at the top of the Baltimore drug trade and have his name ring out in the streets. As the war between the Barksdale and Stanfield crews escalates, Marlo, Chris and Snoop meet with Marlo's advisor and banker Vinson (Norris Davis) and have the following exchange about the ongoing conflict (s03e06):

Vinson: He's gonna have to come back at you. You know they ain't gonna stop at this.

Marlo: I don't want it to stop. Barksdale weak today. And he ain't working with the ammunition I got.

Vinson: No doubt you carrying a full clip, but what you gonna do when you sitting at the head of the table? Once you there, you got to hold it down.

Marlo: That sound like one of them good problems.

Vinson: Prison and graveyards. Full of boys who wore the crown.

Marlo: Point is they wore it. It's my turn to wear it now.

Marlo's primary desire, beyond making money and even beyond his own personal safety, is to be a kingpin - to wear the crown. In the fifth season Marlo justifies the renewed hunt for Omar by arguing that "the crown ain't worth much if the nigger wearing it always getting his shit took" (s05e02). In a later episode, after Prop Joe has been killed and Marlo has taken his place, Marlo shows genuine satisfaction and pleasure as he places his hand on Chris' back and asks "Do it feel like the crown on your head right now? Do it? Cos that's what I'm wearing on my head" (s05e05). Finally, when Marlo is informed by Levy that he can stay out of jail only if he retires from drug dealing, Marlo's paraphrase is that he must "give up the crown" (s05e10). These repeated references to 'the crown' emphasise that for Marlo ascending to the position of kingpin has very little to do with the accumulation of wealth, and far more to do with reputation, respect and power.

This is neatly indicated by the hobby that Marlo engages in during the series – the high-stakes poker game that is eventually robbed by Omar. Despite repeatedly losing hundreds of thousands of dollars to his opponents, Marlo never seems concerned about the money and instead is focused on improving to the point where he can defeat his adversaries. Money is not the object of the game for Marlo, partly because he makes as much as he could reasonably spend already,

and partly because he shows little interest in material wealth. In the poker game money is simply the means by which everyone can assess who won and who lost, and the impression created is that this is how Marlo views the drug game as well. Money inevitably comes with success in the drug trade, but it holds no special place for Marlo other than as a way of demonstrating his dominance. This is precisely why Stringer's offer of greater wealth but less power is so easy for him to refuse. The contrast with Stringer is obvious, since Stringer has no interest in the street-level concerns regarding reputation and one-upmanship; he is only interested in making money so that he can turn it into even more money. The contrast is emphasised in the final episode of the series when the corrupt lawyer Maurice Levy (Michael Kostroff) takes Marlo to meet many of the same developers and politicians that Stringer had been working with (s05e10).

Uninterested in mingling, Marlo leaves the soirée and returns to the street, where he deliberately provokes a confrontation with two dealers which he successfully fends off. No matter that the terms of his plea bargain mean he has to give up the crown, Marlo is completely a product of his environment and there seems to be no other life he could or would accept.

Marlo also helps reinforce the importance of reputation and respect in the illicit market. Earlier seasons feature characters (Wee Bey, Slim Charles [Anwan Glover]) who are valued in the Barksdale organisation because of their effectiveness as muscle, but Chris and Snoop take this to an extreme. This is due not simply to the number of people they have killed, but the rationale behind many of the killings, which can be for such minor trespasses as being suspected of impugning Marlo's reputation, or daring to challenge him when he provocatively shoplifts from a supermarket. Any dissent or opposition to Marlo is considered just cause for Chris and Snoop to pay them a visit, and the fact that the bodies disappear without a trace means that rumour and urban legend combine to make Marlo and his enforcers seem almost supernatural (as evidenced by Randy's assertion that Chris and Snoop are turning their victims into zombies). Because Chris and Snoop are so good at killing people, and their body disposal technique is so effective,

it allows Marlo to use murder without fear of consequences, which means that he uses it as a first resort, not a last.

Marlo recognises the accuracy of Stringer's observation that what really draws police attention is not drug trafficking, but the murders that always accompany it. Stringer seeks to minimise police attention by creating a forum for dispute resolution based on mutual self-interest, so that violence is minimised. Marlo does so by ensuring the evidence of his murders is hidden. Marlo has Chris and Snoop eliminate all opposition and then make the bodies disappear by interring them in the row houses. Although the people on the street know about the killings, their fear of Chris and Snoop ensures that they are far too afraid to say anything to the police. Simply being seen in the company of the police at any time for any reason is enough to warrant execution on suspicion of being a snitch. This theme is present throughout the fourth season, and is most distressingly emphasised by the firebombing of Randy's home when word gets around that he has been talking to the police. Each murder therefore serves a dual purpose for Marlo – it is an effective solution to whatever problem presents itself, and it reinforces his reign of terror over the neighbourhoods of West Baltimore.

The scene that most vividly brings home how vital reputation is to Marlo's control of the Baltimore drug trade comes in the penultimate episode of the series (s05e09), following the arrest of Marlo, Chris, Monk (Kwame Patterson) and Cheese (Method Man). As they discuss who could be the source of the information that resulted in their arrest, Monk lets slip to Marlo the fact that, before his death, Omar was openly calling out Marlo on the street, daring him to confront him face to face and impugning his masculinity:

Marlo: Omar said what?

Chris: Nothing. Omar tried calling you out by name but, shit, it ain't nothing...

Marlo: What he say about me?

Chris: Nothing, man. Just talking shit.

Marlo: He used my name? In the street? Talk, motherfucker!

Monk: He just, you know, say you need to step to and that. I don't know, he just running his mouth some.

Marlo: He call me a punk?

Chris: It was bullshit man, you ain't need that on your mind.

Marlo: What the fuck you know about what I need on my mind, motherfucker?! My name was on the street? When we bounce from this shit here, y'all gonna go down to them corners, let them people know word did not get back to me. Let 'em know Marlo step to any motherfucker; Omar, Barksdale, whoever. My name is my name!

This moment is particularly notable because is the culmination of much of thematic weight that Marlo has carried through the previous three seasons. Its importance is demonstrated by how different this moment is from any other scene that in which he features. Throughout the past three seasons Jamie Hector's performance of Marlo has been extremely restrained, with very minimal shifts of expression successfully conveying Marlo's menace and calculating nature. This scene is the first time that the audience sees Marlo so much as raise his voice in anger, so the fury of his response seems magnified in the confined space of the echoing room. Even more unexpected is the fact that Marlo directs his ire at Chris, since up to this point the two men have seemed completely inseparable, and to see Marlo turn on his number two so aggressively brings home the gravity of the situation, and how ferociously Marlo guards his reputation. This effect is heightened by the unnatural quality of the blue lighting, which highlights Hector's facial scars, and by the very gradual dolly into Marlo's face that emphasises Hector's performance (fig. 21&22). Marlo's animation and anger stem not only from the knowledge that his name was being slandered on the street, but from the fact that as Omar is now dead, the opportunity to

meet the challenge no longer exists. Marlo's fury is an indication of how acutely he appreciates the importance of the reputation he has crafted, and how vulnerable he would be if people in the street believed that he really was afraid of Omar.

Conclusion

As discussed above, one of the reasons why *Wire* scholarship often de-emphasises the importance of prohibition is that the low cultural status of the police procedural appears to trouble some writers, who go to great lengths to assert how different the series is from what has come before. Indeed, some would prefer to avoid being associated with something as mundane and low-brow as a television programme at all, and prefer to call the series a '60-hour movie' or a 'visual novel'. This chapter has proposed that these arguments probably say more about the cultural prejudices of the author, or the historical status of television as an artistic medium, than they do about the actual textual properties of *The Wire*. For *The Wire* is demonstrably a show about prohibition – police and drug dealers make up by far the biggest proportion of the cast, provide the impetus behind each season's storyline and fill the greatest amount of screen time. Beyond issues of cultural taste and esteem, the tendency to downplay the prohibition storylines can also be understood as a possible symptom of the centrifugal narrative, as this provides each successive season with a degree of novelty and a set of new characters that not only expand upon the representation of prohibition as a system, but also provides opportunities for analysing representational issues that can seem unconnected to prohibition. Although the number of new characters is always smaller than the number of continuing characters, it still represents a significant deviation from the preceding season and implies a shift of focus. Yet, as one of the show's oft-repeated maxims has it, to assume that new areas of representation should be taken as separate from those dealing with prohibition is to forget that 'all the pieces matter'.

This aspect of the series arguably demonstrates the value of distinguishing between series that are to varying degrees hybrids of episodic and serial narration, and those fully-serialised series like the case studies that do not involve any significant episodic narrative influence. *The Wire* was arguably the first of the contemporary prestige series to embrace full serialisation and it did so at a point in time when television scholars were still attempting to articulate the specifics of conventional narrative complexity, and thus were arguably less sensitive to the differences between such shows and *The Wire*. Had the narrative organisation of the series been tilted slightly more heavily towards the centripetal side of the spectrum, it is conceivable that the centrality of prohibition as a theme would have been more readily appreciated. The series is so heavily centrifugal that it can appear to be utterly without a central point, or to have a centre that shifts from institution to institution with each passing season. Had the series been just slightly more centripetal in its narrative design it might have made the importance of the prohibition theme more apparent as the organising logic of the series, rather than as just one part of the whole. The possibility exists that the centrifugal narrative structure is almost too appropriate for the representation of prohibition, as it facilitates such a comprehensive and wide-ranging articulation of the topic that many critics failed to appreciate the consistent thematic connection between the different narrative threads. This is hardly a criticism of the series, but it does indicate why consideration of the impact of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum on representation is a potentially fruitful endeavour.

While the show continues to add detail and context to its representation of drug prohibition with every successive season, the most significant and substantial articulation of the subject comes from the Hamsterdam storyline and the depiction of the show's principal drug dealers. In both cases the centrifugal narrative drive has a significant influence on the way the story progresses, but it does so in distinctly different ways. As already outlined, Hamsterdam is an exercise in gradual, cumulative narrative progression. The establishment of the scheme is predicated on the ability of its participants (Colvin, Carver, The Deacon) to respond to problems as they arise,

emphasising the collaborative and bottom-up approach being taken. This is contrasted with the top-down approach taken by Stringer in relation to the Co-Op – Stringer is a dreamer who believes he knows better than those with arguably more experience than him, whereas Colvin is far less interested in his role as a visionary or reformer, and is concerned with making small, appreciable improvements for the citizens of his district. The development of Hamsterdam is gradual, taking multiple episodes to go from the kernel of an idea to a functioning reality. This slow build-up is facilitated by the way the centrifugal narration constantly juggles multiple storylines, ensuring that the Hamsterdam story is always just one moving part among many. This means that the polemical nature of the storyline is de-emphasised, while the comparisons between Colvin and Stringer are able to emerge slowly, until they finally come into contact with one another and their essential similarities as failed reformers can be appreciated.

The representation of the series' main drug dealers is a critical component of the way the series characterises prohibition as a system. In the first season Avon and Stringer's partnership is depicted as essentially symbiotic, combining the battle-hardened Avon's street-level understanding of the drug trade with the intellectual Stringer's application of economic theory and corporate management techniques. The durability of the Barksdale organisation as a drug-dealing enterprise emphasised the importance of both areas of expertise to the attainment of success in the drug trade. However, once Avon is imprisoned the emphasis changes and the flaws in both men's approaches to the drug trade become more apparent, particularly once Marlo appears on the scene. Unlike in other areas of the series (such as Carver throughout the Hamsterdam storyline) the emphasis with the kingpins is on character stasis rather than change – each drug dealer becomes associated with a particular facet of the drug trade, and the failures and/or successes of each character gradually establish a comprehensive representation of the inner workings of prohibited markets. For Avon the key to success in the drug trade is a hard-earned professional reputation derived partly from street-level violence and partly from trustworthiness and reliability in business. With Stringer, it is the belief that there is essentially

no difference between the conditions existing within legitimate capitalist enterprises and the prohibited drug trade, and that by predicating the structure of the drug trade on individual financial interest, he can increase profits while lowering violence (and, as a consequence, police surveillance).

Marlo's eventual victory over Avon and Stringer simultaneously demonstrates the flaws in their approaches to the drug trade, and the superiority of Marlo's. With each successive season that features Marlo, there are more and more demonstrations of the idea that it is violence that exerts the greatest influence within the prohibited marketplace. Marlo's reliance on murder as a default approach to drug market problems not only emphasises the intractability of violence within the system, but also indicates the role of police surveillance in the perpetuation of violence. On multiple occasions Marlo order executions based on little more than the possibility that the victim might be or become a police informant, producing an unacceptable degree of risk. By repeatedly killing possible informants, Marlo not only solves the immediate problem at hand but inculcates an environment of fear and paranoia that diminishes the possibility that another member of the community might pose a similar threat. The brilliance of the row-house entombments is that the evidence is obscured from police surveillance, yet the community in which Marlo's crew operates are fully cognisant of what has occurred, but they are far too afraid of possible retribution to alert the police. The competitive advantage provided by ruthlessly efficient violence and terror is ultimately shown to be the most successful strategy, allowing Marlo to walk free of any meaningful punishment.

Through its constant emphasis on the gradual accumulation of perspective and detail, *The Wire* offers an unusually broad representation of prohibition as a system, pushing the centrifugal narration to its limits in order to be as thorough and detailed as possible. The series' preoccupation with prohibition as its defining issue is so substantial that it has arguably contributed to the under-appreciation of this representational field, as its scope was so great that

the underlying connective tissue was overlooked. Nevertheless, *The Wire* represents an exceptionally comprehensive account of prohibition that utilises the opportunities provided by centrifugal narration to both expand and re-emphasise its overwhelmingly negative assessment of the system and the externalities it produces. Having each season extend and expand the story maintains the thematic importance of prohibition to the series as a whole, while also offering an indication of how multifaceted and complex the policy is, and how destructive.

Chapter 3: Boardwalk Empire

This chapter considers the ways that *Boardwalk Empire* represents and characterises the Prohibition of alcohol that occurred in the United States between 1920 and 1933, with particular emphasis on the way the series engages with the criminal history of the period and the cinematic legacy of the gangster as an icon that was first established during the Prohibition era. As with *The Wire*, this chapter pursues two main lines of inquiry regarding the representation of Prohibition within the series, with particular emphasis on the way that the centrifugal and centripetal narration constrains or facilitates the representational account being conveyed. *Boardwalk Empire* is explicitly rooted in the ‘classic’ gangster film genre of the early 1930s, and understanding how it reworks both the cinematic and actual history of the period is central to understanding its representation of Prohibition as a historical phenomenon and as a system²⁴⁰. Consequently, the following analysis considers how the series’ engagement with the legacy of the gangster genre impacts its understanding of Prohibition and the essential nature of prohibited markets, whether historical or contemporary.

Boardwalk Empire follows a fictional gangster, Nucky Thompson, who is loosely based on the actual boss of Atlantic City, Nucky Johnson, but whose life story is almost wholly invented. Nucky's story is set against a backdrop in which real historical gangsters appear as themselves, which serves to establish a clear historical context. The series generally adheres to the known facts (or at least the most widely circulated rumours) regarding the period's most famous names,

²⁴⁰ For notable cinematic precursors see also, *Underworld* (Josef von Sternberg, 1927), *The Untouchables* (Brian De Palma, 1987), *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949), *Angels with Dirty Faces* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), *Gangs of New York* (Martin Scorsese, 2002), *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990), *Casino* (Martin Scorsese, 1995), *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973), *Road to Perdition* (Sam Mendes, 2002), *Once Upon a Time in America* (Sergio Leone, 1974), *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972), *The Godfather Part II* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), *The Godfather Part III* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1990), *Miller's Crossing* (Joel Coen, 1990), *Bugsy* (Barry Levinson, 1990), *Mobsters* (Michael Karbelnikoff, 1991). See also the television series *The Untouchables* (ABC, 1959-1963).

and sketches their personalities in accordance with popular mythology (Al Capone [Stephen Graham] brutish and short-tempered; Arnold Rothstein [Michael Stuhlbarg] cultured, intelligent and charming; Lucky Luciano [Vincent Piazza] impulsive and tenacious, etc²⁴¹), while also peppering the narrative with well-known incidents from the period. In this regard, the show functions as a contemporary equivalent of the classic gangster trio of *Little Caesar* (Mervin LeRoy, 1930), *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks, 1932), which lifted the characters and escapades in their narratives from notorious gangland incidents. Indeed, the titles of both *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* are direct references to Capone, who was named ‘Public Enemy Number One’ by the Chicago Crime Commission and whose widely-circulated nickname was ‘Scarface’, due to the scars Capone had received in a barroom brawl in his youth²⁴².

However, unlike these early films, which generally limit their historical cues to the lives and actions of famous gangsters, *Boardwalk Empire* goes much further in its invocation of the historical period, incorporating a vast range of incidents into the wider narrative. The series encompasses many other related areas of American life including the entertainment industry (Eddie Cantor [Stephen DeRosa] is a recurring character), sports (Jack Dempsey [Devin Harjes] is Nucky’s guest at one point), politics (particularly the deeply corrupt members of the Harding administration), women’s health, the Harlem Renaissance, Irish Republicanism, and many others. As Martha P. Nochimson notes, “all this connects the dots between local gangster violence and a similar rot at the core of much larger cultural systems with unprecedented clarity

²⁴¹ For more on the personalities and reputations of the Prohibition-era gangsters see David E. Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy: The Gangster in American Culture 1918-1934* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Laurence Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994). See also, *Prohibition* (PBS, 2011).

²⁴² The pilot episode knowingly gestures towards the history of Capone’s nickname and the backstory behind it when the fictional Capone tells Jimmy Darmody that his scars come from fighting in World War One as part of the ‘Lost Battalion’. This was a story that the real Capone promulgated in an attempt to gain esteem and also to mask the fact that he received his scars after he crudely insulted the sister of an acquaintance, who took violent exception to the remark (For more see Bergreen, *Capone: The Man and the Era*).

and precision”²⁴³. The fully-serialised narrative allows the gangsters to be placed in a broader historical and social context, creating a comprehensive account of a period whose previous screen incarnations have frequently been rather limited in scope, often dominated by depictions of spectacular underworld violence without much regard for the broader social context.

The main focus of this chapter are the two intertwined but distinct character stories which extend throughout the entire five season span of the series, covering the years 1920, 1921, 1923, 1924 and 1931. The first is about Nucky himself and how the effects of Prohibition send him down a road of psychological change driven by the ferocity of the illicit alcohol market and an overwhelming compulsion to pursue the almost unlimited profit potential it offers. This storyline is centripetal in its orientation, with Nucky as the consistent centre of the narrative while various configurations of secondary and tertiary characters orbit around him, aiding the elaboration of his character and developing the representational account of Prohibition being articulated. The second section focuses on the partnership between Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky and how their elaboration and development as characters serves a number of allegorical purposes that gesture towards the significance of Prohibition within twentieth century American history. Here the focus is how the use of centrifugal narration provides a more expansive social, political and historical context in which the representation of Prohibition can be developed and deepened. In particular, this section focuses on the way the series represents and contrasts the sale of alcohol and heroin as prohibited commodities, and how this functions as a demonstration of the change in core principles within American organised crime during the period. Before embarking on the analysis of these arguments, it is worth giving a brief account of the style of *Boardwalk Empire* and how this sets the tone for the blend of generic and historical reinvention that is an essential part of the show. This will be followed by a discussion of the gangster film

²⁴³ Martha P. Nochimson, ‘*Boardwalk Empire: America Through a Bifocal Lens*’, *Film Quarterly* 66:1 (Fall 2012), p. 31.

genre, how it has been understood by scholars, and how this relates to the approach taken in *Boardwalk Empire*.

The Gangster Aesthetic

Even by the standards of modern prestige television, *Boardwalk Empire* is a sumptuously composed series. From scene to scene the changes in lighting, costume and set design produce visually harmonious frames in which one or two colours dominate without ostentatiously overpowering the action taking place (fig. 24&25). Yet the aesthetic construction of the series is not only concerned with celebrating the work of the costume and set designers, it is also a key part of establishing the overall mood of the series, balanced between the period setting and the contemporary issues being considered. While there are specific shots that seem to be directly quoting from early gangster classics, generally the approach taken by the series is less about pastiche and more about using shots and camera movements that evokes an older style of filmmaking without being unduly restrictive. Although examples can be found to contradict each of the tendencies described below, they typically function as conscious disruption of the general aesthetic approach, motivated by particularly shocking or perilous moments in the story.

One of the more noticeable features of the series is how much of the lighting of the series comes from natural sources like windows and doorways, particularly in the scenes set in Atlantic City, which utilise a very distinct, bright seaside light (fig. 26&27). By limiting the amount of electrical lighting in scenes, this approach subtly emphasises that the series takes place at a time when electrical lighting was not as ubiquitous as it is now, separating the look of the series from more contemporary shows. This approach also means that night-time scenes have a very distinctive look of their own, with the lack of strong lighting making particularly external night scenes appear almost monochromatic, which provides another subtle reminder of the historical basis for the series (fig. 28). Not only that, but it ties *Boardwalk Empire* to the black and white

gangster classics, particularly since many of the nocturnal outdoors scenes involve gangster violence of the type most associated with those early films (fig. 29).

An even more noticeable feature of the series is how extensively low-angle shots are used and how often the ceilings of rooms are visible in shot compositions as a result. As Jeremy Butler writes, “in classical 1930s cinema and attenuated-continuity single-camera television programs such as *Dallas* (as well as all multiple-camera productions), sets were lit with lighting grids suspended above – making it hard to hang ceilings above sets”²⁴⁴. The use of low-angle ceiling shots in *Boardwalk Empire* is clearly not about aping the approach of the films made during the Prohibition era, but it does emphasise the grandiosity of many of the sets and locations used throughout the series (fig. 30&31). This low-angled shot construction is even maintained when characters are seated – in *Boardwalk Empire* the audience is always far more likely to see the ceiling of a room than the floor (fig. 32). This approach gives the feel of a past era, but the ceilings also make the rooms feel more real and less like sets, bringing the audience closer to the events on-screen, even while being subtly reminded of their historical basis. This effect is heightened by the lack of close-ups used throughout the series, which not only harkens back to the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema, but also ensures that the set design, costumes and lighting are always prominently featured, emphasising the luxuriousness of the production²⁴⁵. This is further bolstered by the use of deep focus cinematography, which makes the storyworld feel like it extends beyond the principal characters and locations while also producing aesthetically distinctive compositions (fig. 33&34).

The old-fashioned feel of the cinematography is also enhanced by the fact that almost every camera movement in the series is achieved either with a dolly or a crane, eschewing the more

²⁴⁴ Butler, *Television Style*, p. 92.

²⁴⁵ For a comprehensive account of classical Hollywood style see, David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985).



Fig. 22

Marlo is unhappy that his name has been disrespected.



Fig. 23

Marlo is really unhappy that his name has been disrespected.



Fig. 24

The sumptuous, colour-coordinated beauty of *Boardwalk Empire*.



Fig. 25

The colour composition of *Boardwalk Empire*.



Fig. 26

The soft naturalistic lighting of *Atlantic City*.



Fig. 27

The use of windows and seaside lighting.



Fig. 28

Monochromatic night scene.



Fig. 29

Monochromatic night scene with gunfire.



Fig. 30

Low-angle composition with visible ceiling.



Fig. 31

Low-angle group composition with visible ceiling.



Fig. 32

Low-angle two-shot composition with visible ceiling.



Fig. 33

Deep focus cinematography in Atlantic City.



Fig. 34

Deep focus cinematography in Ireland.



Fig. 35

The aftermath of the failed assassination of Gyp Rosetti.



Fig. 36

The aftermath of Travis Bickle's rescue mission in *Taxi Driver*.

modern camera techniques like hand-held or Steadicam²⁴⁶. Again, this approach is not about mimicking the exact conditions of filmmaking as they existed during the Prohibition era, but creating a visual scheme that feels appreciably different to other contemporary prestige series. It also means that on the rare occasions when the more modern techniques are employed, they are more arresting and signal particularly strong upheavals in characterisation or narrative. Examples of this would include the failed assassination of Gyp Rosetti (Bobby Cannavale) in the third season (s03e05), which features several Steadicam shots and a birds-eye view of the aftermath (fig. 35) that is a fairly unambiguous reference to the concluding shot of Travis Bickle's (Robert DeNiro) swathe of destruction in *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976) (fig. 36). Much of the penultimate episode of the third season involves shaky hand-held camerawork that is well outside of the show's normal aesthetic, but gives a palpable sense of Nucky's vulnerability and loss of control as Rosetti and his men claim control of Atlantic City. The stately, unhurried feel of the cinematography complements the setting and the series' epic scope, but it also ensures maximum impact when the series deviates from it.

The lavishness of the production and the sombre elegance of its photography aid the approach being taken towards much of the history of the era, because it fills the frame with details of everyday life while also reworking the more established narratives and characters of the period. By incorporating fastidious period details, massive sets and expansive CGI landscapes (fig. 37), the series can bolster the illusion that what is being witnessed bears a strong resemblance to the real period. This means that the account of the era being conveyed is bolstered by a sense of verisimilitude that provides the feel of accuracy and authenticity, even while incorporating fictional characters into the historical record. Those parts of the series that involve elements excluded from earlier representations of the period, such as drug use, benefit from the consistency of the style and the fact that levels of profanity and violence in the series are also

²⁴⁶ It is worth noting that these observations do not apply to the pilot episode, which is at least as concerned with drawing attention to Scorsese's style as an auteur as it with establishing an aesthetic framework for the series as a whole.

exceptionally high. The extent to which any of this reflects the actual reality of the 1920s is less relevant than the way the style of the series sets a tone that softens the more modern elements of the series by framing, lighting and dressing them in such a way as to give the aura of authenticity and plausibility.²⁴⁷

The Classic Gangster

In her discussion of *Boardwalk Empire*, Janet McCabe writes that,

HBO original series, especially the most critically acclaimed like *Boardwalk Empire*, rely heavily on the reassuringly familiar formula of the classic US genre system, even as these shows subvert the codes, revise conventions for television and build into the genre memory.²⁴⁸

In *Boardwalk Empire* this tendency for generic awareness and interrogation is integral to the way that Prohibition is represented. *Boardwalk Empire* marks HBO's second major engagement with the legacy of the gangster film genre following *The Sopranos*, which presented its characters as the final vestiges of a long tradition – one that begins in the 1920s and 1930s with Prohibition and the classic gangster films that emerged from that era. If *The Sopranos* represented the death rattle of the gangster as a figure of glamour and rebelliousness, *Boardwalk Empire* can be understood as the origin story.

As McCabe notes, having Martin Scorsese direct the pilot episode is a firm indication that the audience is being encouraged to view the series as part of a tradition that has continually revised and reworked the mythic qualities of the gangster over the past eighty years. According to McCabe, “Scorsese has long had a reputation for understanding only too well America’s

²⁴⁷ For more on the style of *Boardwalk Empire*, see Janet McCabe, ‘HBO Aesthetics, Quality Television and Boardwalk Empire’ in Jacobs and Peacock (eds.), *Television Aesthetics and Style*, pp. 185-198; Patricia Thomson, ‘Mob Money’, *American Cinematographer* 91:9 (September 2010), pp. 34-49.

²⁴⁸ McCabe, ‘HBO Aesthetics’, p. 190.

fascination with the gangster as tragic hero, as well as the genre's privileged position within American cultural life, as he, at the same time, gives renewed representation to that love affair"²⁴⁹. While Scorsese's gangster films are set several decades after the events depicted in *Boardwalk Empire*, he is rightly understood as,

Someone who is already known for taking the visual and folkloric iconography established by Warner Bros. and RKO gangster movies during the classical Hollywood era, and reworking those forms and styles filtered through his own revisionist contribution to the genre (involving identity politics, modern crime and violence).²⁵⁰

As shall be seen, *Boardwalk Empire* is engaged in a similar process of revisionism that seeks to retell the history of the period on an epic scale that accommodates a great deal of context for the rise of the gangster as both a historical and generic figure.

In recent years a number of critics have argued that previous accounts of gangster cinema have been far too prescriptive when it comes to the attributes that define the gangster film, and have argued that broader definitions are needed²⁵¹. While acknowledging the validity of these arguments, for the purposes of this chapter it is necessary only to attend to the three films that are widely considered the 'classics' of the 1930-1932 gangster cycle – *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* – together with a later entry in the genre, *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh, 1939). The scholarship that has built up around these films, will be used to demonstrate how *Boardwalk Empire* adapts and reworks some of their thematic tropes, particularly as they relate to the gangster as an ethnic minority, the gangster as an expression of capitalist logic, and the classic gangster films as conscious and deliberate representations of history.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 191.

²⁵¹ See Lee Grieveson, Esther Sonnet and Peter Stanfield (eds.), *Mob Culture: Hidden Histories of the American Gangster Film*, (Oxford, UK: Berg, 2005); Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema: From 'Little Caesar' to 'Pulp Fiction'*, (Basingstoke, UK; New York: Palgrave, 2002).

When considering the gangster's status as ethnic minority, Jonathan Munby makes the point that while gangsters had featured in films throughout the 1920s (as Grieveson, Sonnet and Stanfield demonstrate) it was only in the early thirties, and the releases of *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy* and *Scarface*, that the depiction of the gangster on-screen became a highly contentious issue. Munby attributes this increased controversy to the deeply challenging and unconventional treatment of the gangster character in the 30s 'classics', particularly to the casting of non-WASP actors like the Jewish Paul Muni and the Irish-American James Cagney, whose accents and slang gave their characters a popular appeal with white working-class immigrant audiences. The significance of this, as Munby argues, was that for the first time movie stars were talking like normal cinemagoers, "which only enhanced his [the gangster's] status as an outspoken representative of the *vox populi*"²⁵². This not only invited a sense of identification with the gangster but also altered how he was perceived – "whenever the gangster speaks he reveals that this American's story is delivered from a very specific cultural space. His accent frames his desire for success within a history of struggle over national identity"²⁵³. What this meant was that "what gangster films popularized was not only a critical disposition toward the law but national identification with an ethnic urban type"²⁵⁴. For Munby the gangster only became a meaningful figure when he began to talk, and the three 'classics' deserve their place within the standard history of the genre because they gave the gangster a class and ethnic identity that had not previously existed, but which would become central tenets of the genre from then on²⁵⁵.

The fact that, both in the real world and on-screen, the gangster was an ethnic outsider is an important aspect of the story being told in *Boardwalk Empire*, but it also had a significant influence on the way that the narrative arcs of the classic trio of films have been interpreted and developed throughout the genre's history. The gangster was a reflection of the desires of

²⁵² Jonathan Munby, *Public Enemies, Public Heroes: Screening the Gangster from 'Little Caesar' to 'Touch of Evil'*, (Chicago, IL; London: University of Chicago Press, 1999), p. 43.

²⁵³ Ibid, 44.

²⁵⁴ Ibid.

²⁵⁵ For more on the importance of ethnicity to the cultural understanding of the gangster in the 1920s-1930s see David E. Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy*.

immigrants who saw themselves as Americans but who, due to their background and religion, were treated as outsiders by the white Protestant establishment and often discriminated against. The protagonists of the classic gangster trio all have a very American belief that they are exceptional and deserve the opportunity to grab their own piece of the American dream, but are frustrated by the restrictions that prevent them from doing so. For these reasons they gravitate towards criminal enterprises (often involving bootlegging, but not always) that mean they have equal access to the machinery of wealth creation. Within that context the gangster protagonist's cunning, determination and violence allow him to rise swiftly through the ranks until he reaches the top, at which point his hubris catches up to him and he dies isolated and alone. The death of the gangster was born out of the necessity to appease the demands of Hollywood censors who wanted the audience to be left with the sense that, however appealing the gangster's rise to power might be, the final lesson was that crime definitively did not pay. However, as Munby indicates, these endings often relied upon profound changes in the gangster's behaviour and temperament, making them seem muddled and unsatisfactory and turning "the gangster's death into a question rather than a solution... Ironically, the improbable character of these gangsters' deaths revealed how attempts to establish closure and re-establish the moral order were seen to be acts of violence and censure"²⁵⁶.

The need to make the gangster's career appear ultimately futile was due to the desire of the Production Code Administration (PCA) to limit the ideological disruption that the gangster's initial success appeared to validate. The most obviously problematic feature of the gangster was his successful application of violence as a means to get ahead and triumph over his rivals. However, as David Ruth indicates, the problem was not just the moral message and its potential impact upon the suggestible public, but also that violence was presented as efficient and effective in resolving business disputes which occurred in the illicit alcohol market. Ruth writes;

²⁵⁶ Munby, *Public Enemies*, p. 64.

In the use of violence criminals pursued the same goal of efficiency that lay behind the more general appropriation of business methods. Descriptions of smooth-running illegal enterprises were rife with assessments of the gangsters' marvellous efficiency.

Specialization, expertise, technology, and hierarchy were important because they enabled criminals to pursue business's guiding light... Gangsters showed that business culture's most cherished ideal, like its methods and structures, could function equally well in the service of evil.²⁵⁷

The connection between the gangster and modernity has been one of the hallmarks of gangster film scholarship from its earliest days, with the gangster frequently being associated with technology and the city in the popular imagination and on the screen²⁵⁸. What also made the gangster a modern invention was the way that he appeared to imitate and ape the ideals of legitimate capitalism in an illegal context – bootlegging and racketeering might have been illegal, but these practices were conducted using the same techniques found in the new world of business and businessmen. As Nicole Rafter explains, the classic gangster films;

Portray gangsters as desperate men in a desperate hour, victims of a society that stresses wealth and status while failing to provide working-class men with the means to achieve these ends. Despite their proclamations of anticriminal intent, 1930s gangster films turned criminals into heroes. No matter how violent and unlawful the movie gangsters, many Americans identified with them, sharing their economic disadvantages and dreams of wealth during hard times.²⁵⁹

Munby also argues that for many ordinary citizens and cinemagoers the gangster provided far more than just a sensationalist thrill, writing that;

²⁵⁷ Ruth, *Inventing the Public Enemy*, p. 54.

²⁵⁸ For more on the relationship between the gangster and modernity, see Robert Warshow, 'The Gangster as Tragic Hero', *Partisan Review* (1948) rpt. in Barry Keith Grant (ed.), *Film Genre Reader II*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995), pp. 581-586; Fran Mason, *American Gangster Cinema*.

²⁵⁹ Nicole Hahn Rafter, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 27.

In the context of 1930 the ‘legitimate’ culture was itself under duress. Through its direct association with economic catastrophe and the enforcement of the unpopular Volstead Act, ‘official’ society became increasingly susceptible to a ‘bottom-up’ critique. *Little Caesar*’s box office success has to be understood in this context: as a film that, in light of the Crash and the repressive order of Prohibition, dramatizes the deferment of capitalism’s promises from the perspective of the vernacular American subject. *Little Caesar*, *Tommy Powers*, and *Tony Camonte* all attempt to execute those otherwise deferred promises of upward mobility and cultural inclusion within the existing social structure. As films that found their audiences in the Depression metropolis they testified to the polyglot American reality that was increasingly at odds with the rarefied discourse of official society.²⁶⁰

The gangster, seen from this perspective, was not really the villain of these stories, but an audience proxy who dared to demand access to the idea of the American dream promoted by official culture, but denied to the lower class and ethnic populations in reality. As such, the gangster became the dark reflection of the legitimate businessman, with the gangster’s often spectacular and destructive violence acting as a metaphor for violence hidden within the capitalist system that had so recently wreaked havoc on the lives of ordinary citizens.

While the classic gangster films were clearly reacting to the conditions that existed during the time of their productions, J.E. Smyth warns that many gangster film scholars over-emphasise “gangster cinema’s mythic narrative formula, its inescapable modernity, and its paradoxical reflection and subversion of the American Dream”²⁶¹. Smyth points out that “as early as the 1930s, a variety of American historians considered the impact of the gangster – in particular, Al Capone – on the construction of American history”²⁶² and that the various creators of the

²⁶⁰ Munby, *Inventing the Public Enemy*, p. 50.

²⁶¹ J.E. Smyth, *Reconstructing American Historical Cinema: From ‘Cimarron’ to ‘Citizen Kane’*, (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2006), p. 59.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 60.

gangster ‘classics’, “prominently engaged with twentieth-century history in their attempts to structure events of ten, five, or even one year earlier within the discourse of an emerging historical cinema”²⁶³. Both *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* openly referenced both notorious underworld figures and events in their narratives, with *Scarface* being particularly unabashed in its recreation of infamous events in the career of Al Capone, including the murder of ‘Big Jim’ Colosimo (also depicted in the pilot episode of *Boardwalk Empire*) and the St. Valentine’s Day Massacre. Moreover *The Public Enemy* clearly placed itself in a historical film tradition by dividing its narrative into different sections using title cards announcing the year in which the following action took place (1909, 1915, 1917, 1920). Smyth notes that the reason why *The Public Enemy* and *Scarface* faced particularly tough scrutiny from the PCA was because the censorship board appreciated that their stories were based on real events. As Smyth puts it, “when gangster films were contained by fiction, the censors knew they were harmless, but historical gangster pictures were dangerous”²⁶⁴. This means that rather than viewing Hollywood filmmakers as “unconscious mythmakers”²⁶⁵ who lacked “the necessary textual depth, historical evidence, argument, and critical distance that more traditional writers of history possessed”²⁶⁶, the creators of the ‘classic’ gangster film were very aware that they were presenting an interpretation of history, as was their audience.

It is for this reason that *The Roaring Twenties* is worth considering in relation to *Boardwalk Empire* and its take on the history of Prohibition. Compared to the reputations of the ‘classic’ trio, *The Roaring Twenties* is comparatively obscure, despite the fact that it was a major production in its day²⁶⁷. It concerns the story of Eddie Bartlett (James Cagney) a WW1 veteran who returns home to America only to find himself out of work and short on sympathy. After

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 59.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Jack Shadoian, *Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster Film*, (New York; Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), p.31; Colin Shindler, *Hollywood in Crisis: Cinema and American Society, 1929-1939* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 137.

inadvertently getting involved in bootlegging, he swiftly rises to an elevated position as a gangster and become a great success, before he loses everything in the Wall Street Crash and is killed protecting the woman he loves from his old gangster partners. The reason for using this film to help analyse *Boardwalk Empire* is that, far more than the ‘classic’ trio, *The Roaring Twenties* self-consciously presents itself as an epic historical account of the Prohibition era, with a clear and explicit delineation of the causes and effects behind the gangster’s story.

Writing of the ways that the history of the Prohibition era was understood by contemporary historians, Smyth claims that,

Academics wrote of a series of impressive forces and events which controlled postwar American history: modernity, Prohibition, wealth, crime; popular historians located the figure who manipulated all of these factors and shaped the decade, satisfying a public need for both hero and villain: the gangster.²⁶⁸

While the classic gangster films were clearly intended to invite comparisons with infamous real-world figures and events, the importance of Prohibition to these stories was often underplayed or, in the case of *Little Caesar*, completely absent. *The Roaring Twenties* therefore stands as an indication of how the understanding of the gangster (both as a historical phenomenon and as a cinematic icon) had changed only seven years after *Scarface* and six years after the repeal of Prohibition. The film avoids the narrow historicism of the classic films, which were responding to very recent history in a way that emphasised the importance of the individual (especially Al Capone) to the story of the age, and instead places the period’s famous gangsters into a broader historical context. In this respect, *Boardwalk Empire* can be seen as a direct descendant of *The Roaring Twenties*, positioning itself as the origin story of American organised crime while also gesturing to events and consequences that extend far beyond the Prohibition era. As McCabe writes, “*Boardwalk Empire* intervenes into founding myths of nationhood at the point where

²⁶⁸ Smyth, ‘Revisioning Modern American History in the Age of *Scarface*’, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 24:4 (October 2004), p. 537.

folklore is in the process of being written”²⁶⁹ and clearly asserts its own view of history while reworking key aspects of that mythology.

Homage to the Classics

As might be expected, the pilot episode of *Boardwalk Empire* (s01e01) establishes many of the characters, themes and motifs that will become familiar throughout the series. Just as importantly, it unambiguously establishes the lineage of the series from the gangster classics through *The Roaring Twenties*. In particular there are two sequences where director Scorsese deliberately references scenes from *The Public Enemy* and *The Roaring Twenties*, both of which involve alcohol and act as an indicator of the approach being taken throughout the series. The first comes early in the episode and involves an extensive tracking crane shot showing Nucky walking out of his hotel and strolling along the boardwalk as people hurry to drink and purchase as much alcohol as they can before the Volstead Act goes into effect at midnight. As the camera sweeps over the crowd it comes to rest on a couple pushing a baby carriage full of liquor bottles in front of them, with the mother holding the baby in her arms (fig. 38). This shot is a direct quotation of an equivalent sequence in *The Public Enemy* (fig. 39), and furthermore both sequences are preceded by a title card establishing that the year is 1920 and the action is taking place the night before Prohibition begins. In *Boardwalk Empire* this quotation of the early classic not only acknowledges the origins of the gangster genre and indicates a conscious engagement with its cinematic legacy, it also emphasises the importance of the historical moment to the story more generally.

As already noted, *The Public Enemy*’s narrative is segmented into four time periods, the most significant of which is the ‘1920’ card, which marks the point where Tom (James Cagney) and Matt (Edward Woods) graduate from small-time hoods to big-time gangsters, making the

²⁶⁹ McCabe, ‘HBO Aesthetics’, p. 195.

relationship between Prohibition and criminal enrichment obvious. The shot of the baby carriage is followed by a scene that involves Nucky giving a toast to the assembled political establishment of Atlantic City on the subject of what will happen once Prohibition comes into effect:

Nucky: Mr Mayor, friends, fellow members of the city council. As you know, in less than two hours liquor will be declared illegal by decree of the distinguished gentlemen of our nation's congress. To those beautiful, ignorant bastards!

Nucky goes on to say that “the opportunity that is the Volstead Act has not merely knocked, my friends, it has kicked our fucking doors in”. When one of his guests expresses scepticism at this, Nucky's response is that “it'll be like Prohibition never happened, but for one thing; prices will increase twentyfold”. Nucky goes on to outline how the new system of alcohol distribution will work (with his brother Eli, who is also the sheriff, as overseer), giving an indelible impression that not only is Prohibition going to be ineffective in Atlantic City, but that it is going to be systematically undermined by the city's political and criminal elite for their own lavish financial gain. Such an impression is bolstered by the scene that precedes Nucky's walk along the boardwalk, when he is shown addressing the Women's Temperance League on the evils of alcohol and expressing his view that “Prohibition means progress”. Nucky's hypocrisy and slipperiness as a politician is emphasised throughout the series, but placing such an obvious demonstration of it so early in the pilot provides both character context and historical context – opportunism rather than conviction appears to be the overwhelmingly hallmarks of political support for Prohibition.

The following day Jimmy (Michael Pitt) and Nucky visit Mickey Doyle's (Paul Sparks) bootlegging operation, located under the floorboards of a funeral home, where the process of turning regular whiskey into heavily adulterated bootleg whiskey is narrated by Mickey, as the camera cuts from one stage of the process to another (fig. 40);



Fig. 37

CGI
composition
of New
York.



Fig. 38

Baby
carriage full
of alcohol on
the eve of
Prohibition.



Fig. 39

The shot
from *The
Public
Enemy* that
Scorsese
borrows.



Fig. 40

The illegal distillery in *Boardwalk Empire*.



Fig. 41

The illegal distillery in *The Roaring Twenties*.



Fig. 42

The spectral, tempting Nucky merges with his dark surroundings.

Mickey: One part real, eight parts water, you heat it up, let it cool, then you add your alcohol to bring up your proof.

Nucky: Where do you get your alcohol?

Mickey: Potatoes. You let them ferment. Smells rough, but compared to a stiff its fucking lilacs. After you add the alcohol you throw in your caramel colouring, your oil of rye, bourbon, depending on what you want.

Mickey then offers Jimmy a sample drink, which Jimmy immediately spits out in revulsion, prompting Mickey to reveal the secret extra ingredient of formaldehyde. The clear implication here is that while the supply of alcohol (as controlled by Nucky) is unlikely to be significantly altered by Prohibition, the general public are going to find that what they drink is of considerably worse taste and quality than it was before. This scene is notable not only because of how it seeks to literally and metaphorically peer behind the scenes of the bootleg alcohol industry, but also because of how closely it mirrors a scene from *The Roaring Twenties*. In that film there is a sequence where Eddie takes his love interest Jean (Priscilla Lane) to see his bootlegging operation in action (fig. 41). As he leads her past the same configurations of vats and tubing that featured in the *Boardwalk Empire* sequence, Eddie explains the process of making bootleg liquor:

Eddie: Now this is a still. Some of the alcohol we get around here is not so good so we give it another cooking. Now Chiggers here is making scotch. A little alcohol, a little water, a little colour, a little flavour, boom. Tonight we deliver at six bucks a quart. Cost; half a buck.

In both texts the purpose of this scene is the same; to impress upon the viewer that the only impact that Prohibition had on alcohol consumption was to reduce the quality rather than the quantity, which actually made alcohol more dangerous than it was before the Volstead Act.

The incorporation of *The Roaring Twenties*' alcohol adulteration scene into *Boardwalk Empire* serves a similar function as the *Public Enemy* reference, as it indicates that the series will be adopting the kind of epic historical approach to the period as that used by *The Roaring Twenties*. However, the scene carries additional weight because it is one of the very few occasions when the average citizen's experience of Prohibition is foregrounded over that of the elites like Nucky. While the rich and powerful will continue to drink the highest quality imported liquor, the average citizen will be left paying through the nose for a massively inferior product, once again emphasising how unfair, elitist and hypocritical the Volstead Act was from the moment of its inauguration. This hypocrisy is frequently emphasised during the first season of the series, with even supposedly respectable politicians (including the future President Harding [Malachy Cleary]) shown to be as awash with bootleg liquor as the gangsters who supply it. Such behaviour was a feature of real-world Prohibition from its inception, and the impression that the Volstead Act did not apply to all classes of people equally only added to the unpopularity of both the law itself and the people who had passed it. As Munby writes, "central to the gangster film's appeal was its critique of Prohibition" which was "widely resented across classes, and the gangster emerged as an object of popular fascination and empathy to the extent that, as a bootlegger, he resisted a very unpopular piece of legislation"²⁷⁰.

This sentiment is echoed in one of *Roaring Twenties* frequent 'March of Time'-style montages that director Raoul Walsh used to provide historical context for Eddie Bartlett's story. Following Eddie's decision to enter into the bootlegging business as a deliveryman, the narrator's voiceover intones:

Narrator: And so the Eddie of this story joins the thousands and thousands of other Eddies throughout America. He becomes a part of a criminal army, an army that was born of marriage between an unpopular law and an unwilling public. Liquor is the password in this army and it's a magic password that spells the dollar sign as it spreads

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

from city to city, from state to state. The public is beginning to look upon the bootlegger as something of an adventuresome hero, a modern crusader who deals in bottles not battles.

This summary indicates the major difference between *The Roaring Twenties* historical approach and that utilised by *Little Caesar*, *Scarface* and, to a lesser extent, *The Public Enemy*, since it places the gangster protagonist within a vast historical context and paints his actions as unexceptional and part of a national trend. As Paula Rabinowitz writes in her analysis of the film, “rather than poverty, this crime story has its origins in government: World War I and the Volstead Act; war and moral panic, the twin fuels of sensational news accounts”²⁷¹. While the gangsters of *Boardwalk Empire* are nowhere near as passive as Eddie Bartlett, they are still shown to exist within the span of history in such a way that there is no doubt that the driving force behind their rise to power is the Prohibition of alcohol and the huge illicit market that it creates.

Nucky Thompson: Full Gangster

Apart from establishing its antecedents, the pilot episode provides the definitive starting point for the character transformation that Nucky undergoes over the course of the series. Following the murderous hijacking in the woods, Jimmy surreptitiously approaches an irate Nucky to apologise for the problems he has caused and to pay Nucky his cut of the profits from the sale of the stolen alcohol. Jimmy keeps trying to impress upon Nucky that his war experience fundamentally changed who he is, telling him “Nucky I’m nothing but a murderer”, and going on to say;

²⁷¹ Paula Rabinowitz, ‘Gang Wars: Warner Brothers’ *The Roaring Twenties*’ in Robert A. Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulesu (eds.), *A Companion to the Historical Film* (Chichester, UK; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 266.

Jimmy: I'm going to hell, Nuck.

Nucky: Aw, knock it off.

Jimmy: No, I am.

Nucky: You are not.

Jimmy: I'm twenty-two years old, I see fellas like fucking Luciano with fancy suits, fucking diamonds.

Nucky: Is that what you want?

Jimmy: That's what you want too! That's what... it's what we all want. Least I've got the gumption to take it.

Nucky: You'd be very foolish to underestimate me, James. I could have you killed.

Jimmy: Yeah, but you won't. Look, you can't be half a gangster, Nucky. Not anymore.

This exchange is important for two main reasons. Firstly, it bolsters one of the main thematic emphases of the pilot, namely that just as corruption and contamination are shown to be features of Prohibition from the beginning, so is the violence that would come to define the era. Scorsese invites this directly in the opening moments of the episode when he freezes the action on a shot of a Al Capone viciously attacking one of the drivers of the Rothstein convoy in the woods while the head of the Women's Temperance League intones "coward, monster, vicious brute..." on the soundtrack. The words are from an anti-alcohol poem and the editing creates a relationship between the words and the image – while alcohol may induce violence and aggression in its users that is nothing compared to the violence Prohibition will provoke in its new suppliers. Only three days after Prohibition becomes law the lure of easy money and the desire for wealth drives Jimmy to murder and disrupts the smooth transition from legal to illegal alcohol Nucky had been boasting about.

The second noteworthy feature of the above exchange is Jimmy's assertion that Nucky cannot be 'half a gangster' anymore, the truth of this statement only becoming apparent as the series progresses and the conditions induced by Prohibition engulf the characters. By the final episode of the second season Nucky's transformation to 'full gangster' is largely complete, symbolised by Nucky's willingness to execute Jimmy himself as punishment for his betrayal and assassination attempt. So important is the idea of Nucky's ongoing transformation that the advertising campaign for the series' third season used the phrase "you can't be half a gangster" as its main tagline.

When Jimmy utters the phrase in the pilot (and throughout the first half of the first season) the viewer is given the impression that Nucky is someone who has risen to his position of power largely because of his political connections and his ability to speak with forked tongue to a range of different constituencies. In the second episode of the series (s01e02), the Prohibition agent Nelson Van Alden (Michael Shannon) and his partner Agent Sebso (Erik Weiner) provide an early sketch for both their boss and the audience of the scope of Nucky's power and influence in Atlantic City, with their words providing a voiceover as the action they describe plays out on screen. According to Van Alden, Nucky Thompson;

"Is corrupt as the day is long, and I'm not just talking about a little graft. There isn't a single business he doesn't get a piece of, nor a public employee who doesn't pay for the right to hold his job. His aldermen make the collections, then fill his coffers every week. Sanitation, police, fire department... The people love him, the darkies especially. Every waiter, busboy and porter swears allegiance to him come election time. And that's just the tip of the iceberg. Casinos, whorehouses, he even owns a wire service for the racing results".

Nucky's boardwalk empire is an extensive operation but one that is relatively stable and Nucky's position at this early stage is far more that of a corrupt but peaceable politician than a

ruthless and violent crime boss. Much of the first season is occupied with the tension between Nucky's position as one of the major bootleggers on the East coast and his desire, stemming from his waning Catholicism, to be a decent human being – albeit one who sometimes has to do bad things to maintain his position. Indeed, at the end of s01e06, Nucky tells an inquisitive prostitute, “I try to be good. I really do”. For the first season at least, this continues to be the case and consequently Nucky remains conflicted, trying to be good, but increasingly finding himself in a business where doing so is seen as an exploitable weakness. This is what Jimmy is getting at when he tells Nucky he can't be half a gangster – in the new post-war world of Prohibition it will not be possible maintain control over a valuable territory like Atlantic City and be a man who likes to see himself as ‘good’ or ‘moral’.

This idea is emphasised in a scene between Nucky and Jimmy later in the season, after Nucky has exhorted Jimmy to return to Atlantic City from Chicago in order to retaliate against the D'Alessio brothers for robbing the casino and shooting Eli (Shea Whigham). While consenting to act as Nucky's new muscle, Jimmy makes a point of forcing Nucky to lay out explicitly what it is that he has brought Jimmy back to do to the D'Alessios;

Jimmy: When I find them, what do you want me to do?

Nucky: Do you need me to spell it out?

Jimmy: I'd like you to say it.

Nucky: Why?

Jimmy: Politician to the last, huh? What, if you don't say it you don't have to deny it later? Or are you just trying to kid yourself?

Nucky: About what?

Jimmy: The fact that you're a murderer, Nucky. That is what you want me to do, right?
Kill them?

Nucky: Yes.

Jimmy: Even the kid?

While Nucky does not verbally respond to this final query, the exchange of glances between them makes it clear that no exceptions are to be made when it comes to extracting revenge. The truth of the matter is that Nucky has been backed into a corner by the aggression of the D'Alessios (assisted by Luciano and Lansky) and he is no longer in a position to handle the situation with kid gloves. In the pilot episode, Nucky's confidence that Prohibition will have no impact aside from greatly inflating the profits to be made from alcohol appears to indicate his foresight and business savvy. He has already made arrangements to keep the flow of alcohol consistent and believes that the corrupt political infrastructure he controls will ably handle the transition from legal to illegal liquor. Nucky fails to realise that, however much he might wish it, prohibited markets do not operate under the same conditions as legitimate ones because of the absence of a framework within which disputes between competitors can be peacefully settled. When every part of an enterprise is illegal, the use of violence as a means of conflict resolution is all but inevitable. Nucky is smart enough to recognise this fact in time to adjust to the new conditions, but he does so under duress. This establishes a pattern throughout the series where Nucky is compelled, against his better judgement, to become increasingly ruthless in order to stay above water as the conditions of the bootlegging trade get more ferocious.

As argued above, *Boardwalk Empire*'s fascination is not with the individual gangster but with gangsterism itself – the social system in which only the 'full gangster' can survive. The scale of the series enables the connections between the violence on the streets, the supply of illegal alcohol, and the widespread corruption of the government and law enforcement to be made comprehensible. In the classic gangster films the forcefulness of the individual gangster antihero

acted as an allegory for the attributes supposedly rewarded by legitimate business (initiative, assertiveness, entrepreneurship, ruthlessness). From this perspective, the violence of the gangster was characterised as an overt and exaggerated form of the violence inherent in capitalism. However, as Nochimson writes, *Boardwalk Empire* “fully raises to the textual level the once secret gangster story subtext that displayed the mob protagonists as less a perversion of the American way of life and more an embodiment of the dangers of the American priority on untrammelled individualism”²⁷². This is what Jimmy perceives when he tells Nucky that he can no longer be half a gangster – the money to be made in bootlegging cannot help but produce a level of greed and competition that will be unlike anything that came before. Before Prohibition there was no real competition for Nucky – he was so fundamentally entrenched in both the criminal and political dealings of Atlantic City that the idea that he could be challenged was practically inconceivable. Yet the onset of Prohibition almost immediately results in violence and a carousel of plots, counter-plots, betrayals, assassination attempts, bombings, stabbings and all the other gory occurrences that pepper the narrative, culminating in the full-blown gangland war that closes the third season. In the middle of all this is Nucky, whose personal trajectory is a more or less consistent descent from whatever moral high ground he believed he had, to the status of cold-blooded killer – the most powerful symbol of this being his decision to shoot Jimmy himself at the end of season two. As he stands over Jimmy’s prone body, gun pointed at his head, Nucky’s last words to him are delivered very deliberately and clearly; “You don’t know me James. You never did. I am not seeking forgiveness”. Nucky has reached a point where questions of morality have lost any interest for him and his only motivation is keeping hold of power.

Nucky’s killing of Jimmy works as an extreme emphasis of both the emotional and psychological journey that Nucky goes through in the first two seasons, and the lengths that it is necessary to go to in the new world of Prohibition to maintain control. The beginning of the

²⁷² Nochimson, ‘America Through a Bifocal Lens’, p. 31.

third season (s03e01) picks up this point in its very first scene, which takes place in an apartment where Manny Horvitz (William Forsythe), Owen Sleater (Charlie Cox) and Mickey are present, along with a thief, Nate (Lee Zarrett), who has stolen alcohol from one of Nucky's warehouses when Mickey left it unattended. Nate is tied to a chair and has clearly suffered some kind of torture at Manny's hands, presumably because he refused to give up the name of his accomplice. Nucky addresses Nate without anger or malice, reserving most of his ire for Mickey, under the pretence that it was Mickey's incompetence, not Nate's thievery, which was to blame for his loss. "I'm not angry, Nate" says Nucky as he rises from his chair, "you were just doing your job". At this moment both the audience and Nate seem convinced that Nucky really means what he says and that he is going to let the thief go – Nate gratefully gives up the name of his accomplice, believing that neither of them is going to be harmed. For a moment this seems like the conclusion of the scene, before the reality is revealed by Nucky's next line – "Untie him... oh but before you do, put a bullet in his fucking head". Manny's words before he pulls the trigger bring home the point of the scene; "certain people you do not steal from". In the previous seasons, Nucky would have almost certainly let the thief live, convinced that the unpleasantness of the experience would ensure that he never stole from Nucky again (in the first season Nucky lets Meyer Lansky go in similar circumstances). For the full gangster Nucky, anything other than murder is a sign of weakness and a message that people can steal from him and live to tell of it.

The completeness of Nucky's transformation from crooked politician to hardened gangster is made even more explicit three episodes later (s03e04) when Owen manages to locate the second thief, Rowland Smith (Nick Robinson), whose house is almost completely full of stolen alcohol. Nucky travels to the house to interrogate Smith, but then finds himself hiding in a cellar with Owen and Rowland when Prohibition agents show up also looking for the thief. Despite his compromised position, Rowland does his best to charm Nucky with his quick wit and irreverence, ingratiating himself with the viewer even if he initially seems to leave Nucky and

Owen cold. By the end of their ordeal it seems like Rowland has grown on his captors, so much so that he takes the opportunity to suggest to Nucky that he should come and work for him. All seems well as the sound of a car indicates that Kessler (Anthony Laciura) has arrived to take them home, until Rowland turns his back on Nucky and Nucky raises his gun and shoots him in the back of the head. The gunshot alarms Owen who draws his own weapon and then seems unusually shaken when he perceives what has happened;

Owen: I thought you were letting him go.

Nucky: Why would you think that?

Owen: I misunderstood.

Nucky: As long as you understand now.

Everything about the preceding scenes seems deliberately designed to encourage the audience to believe, along with Owen, that Nucky has been charmed by Rowland and that he will consequently either give him the job he asks for, or at least will let him go. The fact that the interplay between Nucky, Owen and Rowland is such a substantial part of the episode (along with the fact that the characterisation of Rowland is so likable) seems intended to encourage the audience to believe that this episode is designed as an introduction to a new recurring character. The fact that Owen initially seems irritated and unmoved by Rowland's charms, but over the course of the episode clearly grows to like him, also seems to encourage this interpretation. Consequently the shock that comes from Nucky's execution of Rowland is particularly powerful, and the audience shares the feeling with Owen – Nucky has surprised both the viewer and his second-in-command. The grim finality of Nucky's "as long as you understand now" likewise applies equally to Owen and the audience – any belief that Nucky retains some of his former softness has been well and truly expelled. Rowland stole from the boss of Atlantic City;

the fact that he is young and likable is irrelevant to the question of whether he will pay the ultimate price for this error.

While Nucky's willingness not only to utilise violence but to carry it out himself serves as an indicator of his personal fall from grace, it is not the only way that the creators indicate the effect that Prohibition has on those operating within its illicit market. While the conditions of the market produce violence in predictable if terrible ways, the most subtle effect of the system involves Nucky's gradual inability to trust anything but the avarice of the people around him. This idea is at its most pronounced earlier in s03e04, when Nucky and Owen have a conversation that touches on the recent tension between them and demonstrates Nucky's increasingly mercenary outlook:

Owen: I know who's in charge, Mr Thompson.

Nucky: Maybe you're not happy about it.

Owen: It's not my satisfaction that matters.

Nucky: And what have I done to earn your loyalty?

Owen: You made a place for me.

Nucky: Now minus the soft-soap.

Owen: You pay me.

This answer appears to satisfy Nucky and he responds by offering Owen a drink from his hip flask. This echoes a moment earlier in the episode, when the corrupt Prohibition agent Stan Sawicki (Joseph Aniska) meets Nucky and Owen at Rowland Smith's house. When Owen inquires whether Sawicki contacted any other law enforcement officers in order to obtain the location, Sawicki responds by saying just the one that he could trust, to which Nucky responds "you mean the one that's crooked". In both instances Nucky undermines any notions of trust or

loyalty that stem from motives other than financial self-interest and seems to take comfort in the idea that the only thing that makes his employees loyal are their paychecks.

This mentality even extends into his relationship with his wife Margaret (Kelly Macdonald), which by the third season has become one of simply keeping up appearances as the distrust between the two has become irreparable. Throughout their relationship Nucky has repeatedly impressed upon Margaret that her prospects, and those of her two children, will become extremely limited without the financial support that life with Nucky provides. It is a tactic he resorts to whenever Margaret seems ready to leave him, or when she voices uncomfortable truths that Nucky would prefer to go unspoken. Not only does money increasingly function as the only guarantee of loyalty and safety to Nucky, but it also acts as the guarantor of his marriage and family. When Margaret finally does decide to flee from Nucky's control, he manages to track her down one night to a run-down apartment building in New York where he once again makes an appeal to her based purely on cupidity (s03e12). Looking around at the dingy surroundings, Nucky asks "you submit yourself to this? Out of what, spite? It doesn't make sense. Your life is with me. You're spoilt for anything else. You need to ask yourself how much you're willing to sacrifice just to prove some point that doesn't matter to anyone". He reaches into his pocket to produce a wad of bills and proffers it to Margaret, saying "nobody's watching now, nobody's judging. Take this, for the children, or take it for yourself. You don't have to pretend with me. Take it, and decide later. This is only money. It doesn't mean anything". Looking terrified but defiant, Margaret responds "yes it does", before moving past Nucky and back into her room, leaving him in the hallway, the browns and blacks of the hallway merging with his costume so that he almost looks like he is dissolving into the darkness like a spectre (fig. 42). Margaret has finally rejected Nucky's attempts to reduce their relationship to one of exchange and has asserted that there is value and meaning to money that goes beyond the limits that Nucky is willing to accept. Margaret is opting out of a value system that has

completely engulfed Nucky, and it is unsurprising that her presence in the show is greatly diminished in the following season as a result.

Margaret's escape from Nucky and his world is only possible once she fully rejects the exchange-based relationship that made her life physically luxurious but emotionally and spiritually destructive. This is a step that Nucky is never able to take, although throughout the series there are various moments where Nucky seems able to achieve some distance from the internecine plotting and violence, and to recognise how much better off (other than financially) he would be if he gave it all up. This perspective is advanced in the final episode of season three (s03e12), when Nucky is entrenched in a gangland war with Gyp Rosetti and Joe Masseria (Ivo Nandi). He and Eli are at work fixing a car in the junkyard they are using as a base when the discussion turns to the circumstances that have led them to their current situation:

Nucky: Maybe that's why.

Eli: Why what?

Nucky: We didn't stop while the going was good, always trying to pinch for a little bit more, just in case.

Eli: I never told them to pass the Eighteenth Amendment, did you?

Nucky: Where's it gotten us?

Eli: Worry about that later, after Rosetti's in the ground.

The placement of this scene makes this discussion particularly relevant, coming as it does after a long montage of the numerous murders that have already resulted from the Gyp-Nucky conflict, followed by two scenes showing the frustration and irritation that exists in both camps about the progress of the war. At this point in the story, with his future more uncertain than it has ever been, Nucky seems to grasp the idea that the almost unlimited profit potential of bootlegging

means that he has never been able to be satisfied with what he has, and that he is always grasping for more, not because he needed it but because it was there. Eli notably dismisses these concerns, apparently seeking to absolve Nucky of his responsibility for everything that has happened on the basis that the conditions produced by the 18th Amendment essentially compelled them to keep making more and more money, simply because they could. While this perspective is obviously self-serving, allowing Eli to abnegate responsibility for the situation in which they find themselves it also speaks to the overall thematic thrust of the series – Prohibition created the gangsters (and consequently American organised crime) because whenever a valuable market is made illegal, criminals will step in to fill the vacuum. With a commodity as desirable and widely-used as alcohol, the potential rewards are so high that they increasingly justify any and all actions carried out in their pursuance to the point where, like *The Roaring Twenties*' Eddie Bartlett, the bootleggers are just being carried along by the tide of history.

It is worth noting that the war between Nucky and Rosetti only came about because of Nucky's genuine attempt to distance himself from the bootlegging trade in the first episode of the third season (s03e01), when he tells his most significant alcohol buyers that from now on he will be simplifying operations by only selling to Rothstein. This decision does not have the desired effect, as the extremely volatile Rosetti takes the new rules as a personal insult and begins a vendetta against Nucky that will eventually escalate into all-out war. Towards the end of the season (s03e09), after Rosetti has nearly killed Nucky (and eliminated his paramour, Billie Kent [Meg Chambers Steedle]) in an explosion on the boardwalk, a clearly concussed and confused Nucky summons the most prominent gangsters of his acquaintance for a meeting in his hotel suite. Right before the meeting, Nucky is seated in his bathroom being tended to by Margaret while the memory of the explosion rings in his ears, prompting him to speak about Billie's death;

Nucky: She's dead. She's dead and it's my fault. Everything I touch... You have to understand, no matter what you think of me, there's no walking away. It doesn't work like that. I do it to them or they do it to me. That's all there is.

Margaret: And the men in your office?

Nucky: Either they're with me and we go to war, or they'll smile, shake my hand and walk away. I'll be alone, and that's as good as dead.

The lighting, makeup and performance contribute to make Nucky appear monstrous at this moment (fig. 43), with the camera capturing Buscemi's distinctive gaunt features and sunken eyes in a way that rarely happens throughout the series – he is often presented as charismatic and magnetically attractive to the opposite sex. In this shot he is shown through Margaret's eyes, she having heard him talk in an earlier scene about “wearing Rosetti's guts as a fucking necktie” – a level of crudity and violence that up to this point she had only suspected him capable of. The sense that the mask has fallen away and that the man she has married is finally revealed is emphasised by the fact that following this scene Margaret informs Owen that she will accept his invitation to run away together as soon as possible. Nucky has brought home to her that with Prohibition there are no half measures and things will never return to normal – the terror, violence, fear, secrecy and betrayals that they have experienced are not aberrations but features of the industry in which they are immersed.

This situation is precisely what Nucky was attempting to mitigate by only selling alcohol to Arnold Rothstein – he hoped that by doing so he would escape the caprices of violent gangsters and keep himself isolated and safe. Needless to say, his experience with Rosetti reaffirms this desire and he ends the season by telling Eli that “I don't want anyone knowing who I am. I don't want anyone looking into my business. I don't want anyone coming near us we don't already trust”. The final shot of the episode shows Nucky on the boardwalk, taking his signature red carnation out of his buttonhole and dropping it on the ground before a long crane shot sees him

melt into the crowd with all claims to his earlier celebrity status now relinquished. By the beginning of the fourth season, Nucky's desire for isolation has been emphatically achieved, as he now lives far outside of the city in a closed hotel surrounded by armed guards. The first episode of the season (s04e01) sees Nucky meeting with Rothstein, Masseria, Lansky and Luciano in order to clear the air following the events of the third season, with Nucky once again insisting that his only goal is to live a quiet life without fear of retribution:

Nucky: I have my territory, south to Cape May, north to Asbury Park, west to Trenton. I have the casinos, the numbers and the wire. I'm not looking for anything else.

Lansky: Haven't we had this conversation?

Nucky: I didn't ask for trouble. What was brought to my doorstep, I returned. I'd expect all of you to do exactly the same.

Despite his protestations, it only takes Nucky another two episodes (s04e03) to find a new bootlegging scheme with the potential to make millions of dollars by importing Caribbean rum into Tampa, with assistance of Sally Wheat (Patricia Arquette), who will later become both his business partner and lover. It is during one of their earliest conversations that Nucky displays both considerable self-awareness and summarises the themes that have been driving the series up to this point;

Sally: So how 'bout you? Are you alive?

Nucky: I recall that I was once.

Sally: What happened?

Nucky: Prohibition. Until then I was a simple, run-of-the-mill crook, a corrupt city official. And I was happy. Plenty of money, plenty of friends, plenty of everything. Then suddenly plenty wasn't enough.

This brief conversation brings to the fore the metamorphosis that Nucky has experienced across the span of the series – his progression from the crooked city treasurer the audience met in the pilot episode to the fully fledged gangster sitting in a Florida dive looking to expand his empire even further.

Throughout the series, and particularly in the later seasons, Nucky will return to this idea that he was much better off in the pre-Prohibition days than he is now, despite the increased wealth and power he now wields. In each of the second, third and fourth seasons of the show there is a point where Nucky vows to step away from the business of bootlegging in an attempt to avoid danger and conflict, only to be pulled back into the fray due to his own greed or that of those around him. No matter how aware Nucky becomes of how much of genuine, irreplaceable value he has lost in the pursuit of limitless wealth, the engine of that wealth is so all-consuming and powerful that he is incapable of resisting it. Every season of *Boardwalk Empire* ends with Nucky holding on to power while suffering considerable losses in all other parts of his life, as those he cares about either recoil from the man he has had to become, or get caught up in the violence that is such an inescapable part of his business. Despite all his power, influence and wealth, Nucky is still shown to be ineluctably propelled further down a path that is destroying everything around him, incapable of resisting the wider historical forces at play. While Nucky is almost engulfed by these forces, other characters in the series are shown not only to be riding the waves of the current storm, but anticipating what happens once it is over.

Young Turks and Heroin: Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky

Nucky's storyline provides the central thrust of the narrative and carries much of the thematic weight that has always been a part of gangster narratives wherein the words and actions of the gangster provide a point of comparison between legitimate capitalism and the form it takes

when applied to illicit markets. Throughout *Boardwalk Empire* Prohibition is depicted in relation to its unanticipated consequences so that the overall impression of the era grows increasingly dark, violent and bleak, along with the characters that inhabit it. It is somewhat surprising, consequently, to realise that whereas in Nucky's storyline the seemingly irresistible lure of money gradually corrodes everyone and everything surrounding him, the same impulse is used elsewhere to indicate intelligence, resource and enterprise. Even more surprising is that the context for this is not alcohol but instead a drug that would become perhaps the most stigmatised in modern times, heroin²⁷³. While the narrative about bootleg alcohol and the gangsters who grew rich from it has been widely portrayed, the focus on heroin is much more unexpected and has been almost entirely absent from the cinematic lineage of the gangster film and from popular historical accounts of the period.

However, *Boardwalk Empire*'s conscious engagement with the cinematic legacy of the gangster film, along with the narrative and thematic importance of the heroin trade in the series, means it is instructive to briefly compare the series with the most lauded of all American gangster films, *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972). In a similar manner to *Boardwalk Empire*, the role of heroin in *The Godfather* is two-fold; it acts as a key instigator of various plot developments while also serving a more symbolic role in delineating the different personalities of various characters and signalling a thematic shift in the history of the Mafia. The major plot developments of *The Godfather* are driven by the heroin trade, specifically Don Corleone's (Marlon Brando) refusal to participate in it, which leads to the attempt to assassinate him, Michael's (Al Pacino) double-murder and exile, and the complex web of betrayals and double-crosses that conclude the story. As with *Boardwalk Empire*, heroin is presented as an untapped commodity with the potential to yield extraordinary wealth to anyone able to get in on the ground floor. Tom Hagen (Robert Duvall) tells Don Corleone early in the film that "narcotics is

²⁷³ For more on the place of heroin in American history see Tom Carnwath and Ian Smith, *Heroin Century*, (London: Routledge, 2002); Jay, *Emperor of Dreams*.

a thing of the future. If we don't get a piece of that action we risk everything we have, I mean not now but ten years from now". As with Luciano and Lansky, Tom sees heroin as an untapped market with almost limitless potential, one that can secure the future dominance of its early investors. While not as pronounced as in *Boardwalk Empire*, this perspective still draws on the audience's knowledge of the growth of heroin as a recreational drug to validate the perceptiveness and shrewdness of those characters who are most enthusiastic about the benefits of the drug as an illicit commodity.

Don Corleone presents his decision not to support the heroin trafficker Sollozzo (Al Lettieri) as being pragmatic and cautious, telling him "It's true I have a lot of friends in politics. But they wouldn't be friendly very long if they knew my business was drugs instead of gambling, which they regard as a harmless vice, but drugs is a dirty business". While Don Corleone claims that he has no prejudice against drugs and is simply being cautious for the sake of his business interests, the decision to refuse Sollozzo is more significant and represents a fundamental difference between the Don and his younger family members. The traditional Mafia interests like gambling, prostitution, and loan-sharking are all prohibited by the government but provided by the Corleone family for the benefit of their ethnic neighbourhoods, whereas heroin is part of a truly global network of cultivation, refinement and distribution across several continents.

Stanley Corkin writes that "as Vito refuses this offer, we can see him at odds with his sons and associates, and that the terms of this disagreement are philosophical, based on the degree of criminality he is willing to undertake and the scope of his family business"²⁷⁴. Don Corleone is still wedded to the idea of the Mafia as an essential local enterprise focused on protecting and exploiting local neighbourhood populations, rather than as a global criminal collective. As Corkin argues, Don Corleone "refuses to bring the destructive power of heroin into the community that he both exploits and protects. This gesture of refusal can be understood as an

²⁷⁴ Stanley Corkin, *Starring New York: Filming the Grime and the Glamour of the Long 1970s*, (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 58.

attempt to define a neat ‘before and after the fall’ division of New York, Italian American, and global capitalist history”²⁷⁵.

In this view, heroin acts as a symbol of the changing structure and outlook of the mob, and the shift from a local form of illicit capitalism designed to suit the needs of an ethnically and culturally bonded community to a more globalised form focused overwhelmingly on maximising the potential earnings from illegal commodities or services, without any particular regard for the consequences that might arise. This in turn bolsters the sustained critique of capitalism being advanced in *The Godfather* and which becomes even more pronounced and explicit in the two sequels²⁷⁶. In *Boardwalk Empire*, Luciano and Lansky’s tenacious advocacy of heroin serves to underline that these two men will lead the shift from a more local, ethnically exclusive form of gangsterism to a nationally organised criminal network. In *The Godfather*, heroin provides a point of difference between Don Corleone, who still views his role in the community as more than just exploitative, and the younger gangsters who only see the untapped financial potential of the market. In both texts heroin acts as a predictor of major shifts in the organisation and ethos of the Mafia, while also helping to emphasise the acuity and intelligence of the characters who appreciate how significant these changes will be.

In the first season of *Boardwalk Empire*, the notion that the series is inviting the viewer to draw comparisons between the outcomes produced by alcohol Prohibition and those now taking place under contemporary drug prohibition was unlikely to have been perceived by any but the most predisposed viewers. However, early in the second season the comparison becomes considerably more apposite when Luciano and Lansky meet with Jimmy and invite him to enter into a business arrangement with them, wherein Jimmy will supply them with alcohol and in return they will supply him with heroin. At this point in history heroin was in the process of becoming

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ For more see Nick Browne (ed.), *Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather Trilogy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Jon Lewis, *The Godfather* (London: BFI, 2009); Fredric Jameson, ‘Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture’, *Social Text*, 1 (Winter 1979), pp. 130-148.

illegal, with over-the-counter sales outlawed by the Harrison Narcotics Act in 1914 and the complete prohibition on the drug coming in 1924²⁷⁷. Heroin was initially seen as a safe and effective alternative to opium, which was becoming increasingly demonised and prohibited, but once the addictive properties of heroin became apparent, it too swiftly became illegal. However, as Mike Jay explains;

When the illicit drug market took shape in the 1920s, heroin swiftly became the opiate of choice for the criminal trade. Several times more potent than morphine, it could be smuggled in more concentrated form for more lucrative reward; the fact that the most concentrated form is also the most dangerous became once again, in this new free market, simply a case of *caveat emptor*. It is not the least of the ironies of drug prohibition that it has replaced opium, the ancient plant remedy that can be sipped or inhaled in the mildest of doses, with one of its most powerful synthetic derivatives, prepared for injection into the vein.²⁷⁸

It is worth noting that when Luciano and Lanksy pitch the benefits of heroin to Jimmy and Al Capone later in the second season (s02e10), the points they emphasise are almost identical to those outlined by Jay, except that they put a more positive spin on them:

Luciano: You can sniff it, smoke it or inject it.

Capone: Nice, Sal. You moving chimp drugs now?

Luciano: It ain't hop, it's heroin. And I wouldn't think a whore meister would pass judgement.

Lansky: Heroin delivers a higher dose of opiates to the brain than opium, which makes for a happier customer.

²⁷⁷ Carnwath and Smith, *Heroin Century*, pp. 52-54.

²⁷⁸ Jay, *Emperor of Dreams*, pp. 71-72.

Luciano: No bottles, no barrels. Two million bucks in a suitcase.

Jimmy: What's the bank?

Luciano: Huh?

Jimmy: Who's going to buy it?

Luciano: You got your artist types, people uptown. I seen this one...

Jimmy: How many?

Lansky: Their numbers may be very small right now, but they are very enthusiastic.

In many ways heroin is presented as the perfect commodity – its potency makes it extremely easy to smuggle, it produces an exceptionally strong high and its addictive properties mean that it only requires a very small market share to become highly profitable. It is relevant that this discussion takes place in a large warehouse filled with crates of bootleg alcohol – Luciano's emphasis on "no bottles, no barrels" makes bootlegging seem far more cumbersome and labour-intensive than the prospect of making two million dollars from a single suitcase. Both Luciano and Lanksy are shown to be very conscious of the properties that will ultimately make heroin both an extraordinarily lucrative illicit commodity and a magnet for moral panics and intensive government prohibition. Their enthusiasm for heroin could be read as an indication that they are particularly ruthless or immoral, since in contemporary society heroin is both heavily prohibited and heavily stigmatised. While the prevalence of heroin within the series does seek to engage the contemporary audience's awareness of the drug, this is not primarily moralistic but historical. The drug functions as a foreshadowing of Luciano and Lansky's place within American organised crime, indicating that even in the early years of Prohibition, they are already displaying the mix of opportunism, forward-thinking and ruthlessness that will take them to the very top of their profession.

Utilising heroin in this manner is advantageous because the first four seasons of *Boardwalk Empire* address only the beginning and middle of the Prohibition era (although the fifth season is set in 1931). Consequently, many of the most significant or notorious developments lie outside of the narrative scope of the series (examples would include the Wall Street crash, the Great Depression, the St. Valentine's Day Massacre, and the repeal of the 18th Amendment). Perhaps most significantly, the series does not reach the 1929 Atlantic City conference where the major figures in American crime met to organise their criminal endeavours into a National Crime Syndicate that would facilitate co-operation between the gangsters and provide a forum where disputes could be settled without resorting to violence, at least in theory. Luciano and Lanksy would be instrumental in the implementation of this more corporate form of gangsterism, with Luciano eventually becoming the most powerful gangster in the country, with Lanksy as one of his most trusted and successful advisors. These events occur long after the timeframe established in the series, but they have substantial thematic importance to the historical narrative being articulated.

Despite the fact that the heroin trade only ever represented one illicit Mafia industry among many, *Boardwalk Empire* makes it central to the understanding of Luciano and Lanksy as the two most significant players to emerge from the Prohibition era. Moreover, heroin becomes the catalyst for outlining another profound shift that was exemplified by the formation of the National Crime Syndicate – the erosion of the ethnic exclusivity that saw each tribe (Irish, Poles, Jews, Italians) stick with their own and reject co-operation with the others. The Jewish Lanksy and the Italian Luciano were among the first gangsters to recognise how much more they had to gain through collaboration than they currently could achieve under the older, ethnically ghettoized system²⁷⁹. Finally, heroin fits into the more widespread historical revisionism that the series performs throughout its run, whereby those aspects of the period that have previously

²⁷⁹ It is also established that they were partners in crime even before Prohibition, adding to the sense that they were out ahead of the pack.

been excluded from earlier screen depictions of the Prohibition era (women's rights, political corruption, race) are given prominence alongside the more familiar stories of bootlegging and gangland violence. In this context, heroin acts as a thematic link between the modern era of global drug prohibition and the earlier era of American alcohol Prohibition, because the two are so intertwined in the plot and personnel of the series. By the fourth season, heroin has become a major part of the series and is driving three separate plots; Gillian Darmody's (Gretchen Mol) addiction and recovery, Dr. Narcisse's (Jeffrey Wright) dual career as pan-African educator and black-only heroin distributor, and the Luciano-Lansky-Masseria plan to use Nucky's alcohol delivery trucks as a means to transport their heroin. In addition there is the Al Capone storyline that frequently and emphatically draws attention to Capone's substantial cocaine use – something that can be seen as part of the creators' desire to fill in the overlooked details of the period, and also a knowing wink to the cinematic legacy that Capone inspired²⁸⁰. While the ways cocaine and heroin are used in each of these stories is different, they are both part of a backdrop that gives the sense of a blossoming illicit drug trade running alongside the more established bootlegging industry. Such a sustained focus on drugs underlines the point that modern drug prohibition is not being presented as just analogous to alcohol Prohibition but concomitant with it.

Aside from a brief mention of Luciano's arrest record in the pilot episode, the first time heroin is introduced into the plot is in s02e02, when Jimmy strikes his deal with Luciano and Lansky to exchange alcohol for heroin. Not only does this scene demonstrate the ambition of Luciano and Lansky, but it also involves a brief moment when the young Bugsy Siegel (Michael Zegen), leaving the room on an errand, makes a bizarre yelping sound as he passes Jimmy. When Jimmy inquires as to what Siegel's problem is, Lansky responds;

Lansky: He does funny things sometimes.

²⁸⁰ Most obviously the wild, drug-fuelled remake of *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983) which swapped the bootlegging backdrop of the Hawks original to the Florida cocaine trade, and involved Tony Montana (Al Pacino) snorting more and more cocaine as the movie progressed.

Luciano: (to Lansky) *Meshuge bisl yingl.* (Crazy little kid.)

Lansky: (to Luciano) *Che cose potente fare?* (What can you do?)

Although only a brief moment, this exchange immediately establishes the salient aspects of the Luciano/Lansky partnership as it will emerge over the next few seasons. Having the Italian Luciano speak Yiddish and the Jewish Lansky respond with Italian emphasises the closeness of the relationship between the two men, which is useful character information since in the previous season the only real connection between them was as Rothstein's subordinates. More significantly, it establishes the defining characteristic of their relationship – an inclusive attitude to ethnic differences predicated on a shared understanding that in the cutthroat world of Prohibition, Old World antipathies are nothing but an impediment to the accumulation of wealth, and thus should be set aside²⁸¹. While this is an attitude shared by most of the successful gangsters in the series when it comes to trade with one another, Lansky and Luciano are unique because theirs is a longstanding and genuine partnership, rather than a business arrangement made out of necessity or convenience. It is very soon after this moment that Lansky proposes the exchange of alcohol for heroin.

Later in the episode, Jimmy observes a heated conversation between Lansky and two associates of Joe 'The Boss' Masseria, one of the most powerful crime bosses in New York. When Jimmy asks who Joe Masseria is, Bugsy Siegel responds that he's "a Moustache Pete fat-ass, thinks he owns the Lower East Side". While it is questionable how many audience members would appreciate the 'Moustache Pete' reference, it nevertheless succinctly indicates the conflict that will soon arise between Masseria and the Lansky/Luciano partnership. 'Moustache Pete' was a term used to describe the older generation of the Sicilian Mafia in America (Luciano is a member of the younger generation, known as the 'Young Turks') who were committed to

²⁸¹ In another scene (s02e04) when Jimmy meets the Jewish Philadelphia gangster Manny Horowitz he ingratiates himself by saying "It's nice to meet you" in Yiddish, demonstrating his openness to making business relationships regardless of ethnicity.

running their affairs according to Old World traditions, which meant they would only deal with other Italians. ‘Young Turks’ like Luciano were happy to go into business with Jewish and Irish gangsters because they appreciated the financial rewards that could be produced through collaboration. This history is not necessary to appreciate the divisions between the two generations of Sicilians because it becomes increasingly prominent as the series progresses. The first real hint of this conflict comes in s02e03, when a meeting is arranged by Arnold Rothstein between Masseria, Lansky and Luciano to settle a territorial dispute. Following tense negotiations, Masseria rises to leave and on his way out addresses Luciano in Italian; “what are you doing with these Christ-killers? Come with me, I’ll make you rich”. Luciano’s response is definitively in the negative, but the exchange sets a precedent for the interactions between Masseria and the Lansky/Luciano partnership during the third season.

Even outside of the Luciano and Lansky partnership, the tensions provoked by the various ethnic backgrounds of *Boardwalk Empire*’s characters are a frequent feature of the series’ first three seasons. Sometimes ethnicity is invoked as a tool for manipulation – in s01e08 following the shooting of Eli, Nucky asks Jimmy to come back to Atlantic City from Chicago to act as his muscle and retaliate against the D’Alessio brothers. When Jimmy resists the invitation, arguing that he is doing very well under the wing of Johnny Torrio (Greg Antonacci), Nucky responds “And how far will that go? You’re Irish, Torrio’s Italian. You’ll always be an outsider”. While the argument does not seem to have any effect on Jimmy in the moment (and the talk swiftly turns to money as a more significant motivation), in a later scene he is shown observing Torrio, Capone and two other Italian gangsters sitting playing cards and jocularly ribbing each other in Italian. The sense that Nucky is right and that Jimmy’s Irishness will always be a barrier to his advancement is achieved in several ways. The presence of diegetic Italian music sets the tone even before the scene starts, as it audio loops with the preceding scene and then is joined on the soundtrack by the raucous Italian voices. The audience is provided access to the beginning of the conversation through the provision of subtitles, but when the shot cuts to a MS of Jimmy

watching the group and then is followed by a cut to his perspective, the subtitles are removed and the conversation is unintelligible. As the laughter of the Italians dominates the soundtrack, the shot cuts back to a MCU of Jimmy that holds for several seconds, seemingly inviting the viewer to connect the loss of the subtitles (and thus comprehension) to Jimmy's position as both physical (in his placement within the scene) and ethnic outsider. By the following episode Jimmy has returned to Atlantic City, demonstrating Nucky's ability to convince using arguments he does not believe in, and emphasising the importance of ethnicity to an understanding of the series.

While Nucky is successful on this occasion, the perspective he presents to Jimmy is one that is constantly undermined throughout the series, where willingness to recruit outside talent is often presented as a positive attribute and one possessed by the most successful gangsters. In the first season Capone is given a dressing down about his boorish and immature behaviour by Torrio, who points to his Jewish employee Jake Guzik (Joe Caniano) as an example for Capone to learn from. While the lack of bigotry can make the more progressive gangsters more appealing to a modern audience, this is not the primary purpose of such moments. Instead they serve as an indication of a general historical trend that saw the local, ethnically-exclusive criminal enterprises superseded by national, multi-ethnic collaborations. By having the most famous names of the era (Capone, Luciano, Lansky, Torrio, Rothstein) demonstrate their willingness to put business ahead of prejudice, the series taps into the changing historical conditions while also gesturing to a more profound ideological shift. Throughout *Boardwalk Empire*, but particularly in the second and third seasons, one of the major themes is the contrast between the ideology of the Old World versus the ideology of the New World. The Luciano/Lansky/Masseria conflict is the major driving force behind this idea, but it finds expression in many different areas of the series, because while the Old World values shift according to the backgrounds of different characters, the New World ideology is always untrammelled capitalism. For example, Margaret is a Irish immigrant who is initially seduced by Nucky and the life of opulence and comfort that

he can provide for her and her children, yet her growing awareness of exactly how Nucky makes his living begins to conflict with her Catholic sense of morality. As mentioned above, her eventual rejection of Nucky and his money can therefore be seen as Margaret's rejection of the New World value system and the gangster lifestyle that goes with it. Indeed, they form a vicious circle. The erosion of Old World values is both a cause, and a consequence, of Nucky's gradual descent from half gangster to full gangster.

A similar point is made in s02e09 when Nucky and Owen travel to Ireland to exchange tommy-guns for Irish whiskey, and the leader of the IRA John McGarrigle has a brief private conversation with Owen about Nucky and the potential deal:

McGarrigle: He's out for nothing but himself.

Owen: Fair to say he's in his own war.

McGarrigle: For what?

Owen: A great pile of dosh.

McGarrigle: Is that all they fight for?

Owen: It seems to keep them busy.

Here the essential hollowness of the New World capitalist system is contrasted with the national and ethnic loyalties of the Old World, with the implication being that at least the Irish are fighting and dying for something that is greater than any one individual, whereas the Americans only fight for their own personal enrichment, with no greater goal in sight. This scene falls comfortably into the Old World – New World dichotomy employed by the series, so its meaning can be easily appreciated. Old World loyalty is relatively uncomplicated because it relies on what is most fundamentally shared between people – nationality, ethnicity, geography, history. New World loyalty is based only on the shared financial interests that exist between certain

people at certain times – consequently they can become incredibly tenuous and weak when financial circumstances change.

The suggestion that it is dangerous to expect loyalty based solely on mutual financial benefit is made explicit by Joe Masseria in the third season (s03e04), once Luciano and Lansky have begun selling heroin on Masseria's territory without paying for the privilege. Luciano is summoned to a meeting with Masseria where the conversation is conducted almost entirely in subtitled Italian and involves frequent denigrations of Luciano's Jewish partners along with veiled threats on Luciano's life. The conversation ends with Masseria warning Lucky that "Rothstein, the other one, Lansky – they'll stab you in the back, because they're not your people. Then you'll need help". Masseria's organisation takes ethnic heritage to be the ultimate determinant of loyalty, while Luciano and Lansky base their allegiance on mutual self-interest; they know that working together means more money for everyone involved. Ultimately this form of loyalty is shown to be something of a weakness for Masseria. As the violence between Rosetti and Nucky begins to escalate (s03e07), Rosetti is summoned to meet Masseria who tells him that "I can't control you. I can't rely on you. And I can't afford you", all of which clearly indicates that Masseria is planning to kill Rosetti in order to keep the peace. However, sensing what is about to happen, Rosetti launches into an impassioned speech which directly appeals to Masseria's prejudices and succeeds in saving his life for the moment;

Rosetti: Nucky Thompson, Arnold Rothstein!

Masseria: What about them?

Rosetti: They're not losing sleep over no twenty blocks on the West Side, they're working together. They're building something a lot bigger than you and me.

Masseria: I'll let them do what they want.

Rosetti: Because you think you got what you have, right? But not for long. Things are changing. The Luciano kid.

Masseria: I've straightened him out. You don't worry.

Rosetti: He's not like you and me! Look who he works for, Joe. They're building something and it don't include us. Who's gonna own this business, huh? Hebes and Micks and backstabbing fucks that don't respect where they come from! After all the blood we put into it! (subtitled Italian) *What about us? What happens to us?* You do what you gotta do with me but you're gonna be in a war, whether you like it or not.

Here Rosetti expresses something that has only been hinted at up to this point – that the financial incentives induced by Prohibition are rapidly shifting the terrain of organised crime in America, and that those who put aside their petty ethnic differences will be the ones who prosper, while those wedded to Old World principles will end up being left out in the cold. While the process is only just beginning in *Boardwalk Empire*, the emphasis put on issues of ethnicity in the third season demonstrates the way the series is interpreting the historical importance of Prohibition, and how it fundamentally changed the organisation of crime in America. On the level of ideology, the triumph of the multi-ethnic, 'Young Turk' gangsters over the 'Moustache Petes' like Masseria is driven by an understanding that the only legitimate business motivation is the accumulation of capital, and that petty ethnic rivalries only serve to limit the possibilities for making money.

Contrast the above scene with another from the third season (s03e10), which occurs when Luciano and Lansky go to Rothstein in an attempt to gain financing so that they can make a large bulk purchase of heroin and significantly increase their involvement with the drug.

Lansky: Booze is our backbone but sooner or later this *mishegas* will go the way of the ostrich feather.

Rothstein: Yiddish, Meyer? I can't think of a more obvious route to my acquiescence than shared commonality.

Lansky: How about a good idea?

Luciano: A.R. you're the one who always said to look where no-one else is. That's what this deal is.

The fact that not only does Rothstein notice Lansky's attempt to soften him by gesturing towards their shared Jewish heritage, but goes on to mock the idea that such a connection would have any influence on his inclination to proceed with a business venture demonstrates the divide between Rothstein and Masseria. Masseria is convinced to keep fighting an unnecessary and costly war with Nucky by Rosetti's naked appeal to his bigotry, even when that appeal is obviously being made as a Hail Mary intended to save the speaker from execution. This decision ends up costing Masseria money, manpower and his stake in Luciano and Lansky's heroin business, whereas the shrewd, unbiased Rothstein is not only unmoved by such an appeal but finds it amusing that Lansky would think he could be.

The other important element of this scene is that Lansky makes the underlying argument about the equivalence that exists between heroin and alcohol explicit. While bootlegged alcohol is by far the most profitable of the duo's current endeavours, Lansky and Luciano are thinking long-term and acknowledging that the unpopularity of Prohibition means it cannot last forever. By getting in early with heroin, Lansky and Luciano are looking to secure the future of their criminal enterprise by developing a market in a drug with many properties that make it an ideal illicit commodity. The enthusiasm of Luciano and Lansky for heroin's commercial potential is emphasised forcefully and repeatedly over the course of the series, and the aspect most frequently stressed is the growth potential of the market. It is this emphasis that makes the nature of the comparison between alcohol and heroin most apparent; in the same way that Nucky cannot resist the temptation to make as much money as possible from Prohibition, so

nothing will deter Luciano and Lansky from getting into a position where they can make as much money as possible from heroin. Despite the failure of the plan to make Jimmy the new boss of Atlantic City, the huge losses they incur after Rothstein subverts their heroin deal with Masseria, and the near-execution that Lansky suffers once Nucky discovers his liquor trucks are transporting heroin, the two men never waver in their devotion to the drug.

Heroin, as the series makes clear, was one of many drugs swept up in an equivalent moral panic about the substances people introduced into their bodies for purposes of pleasure or relief. The philosophy that drove the Prohibition of alcohol was the same as that which inaugurated drug prohibition and not only did it occur at the same time, but in *Boardwalk Empire* it is shown to have been exploited by the same people. While the repeal of Prohibition meant that its ill-effects (violence, corruption, poisoning) significantly diminished, drug prohibition continued without interruption, providing a useful income for ex-bootleggers as they adapted to the new conditions. Moreover, Luciano and Lansky were undeniably right about heroin's financial potential, and just as *Boardwalk Empire* makes it abundantly clear that as the wealth created by illegal alcohol produced untold misery and suffering, so will the wealth created by the illicit market in heroin and other prohibited drugs in the century ahead. While that particular storm has not swept over the beaches of New Jersey as the bootleg bottle of alcohol do in *Boardwalk Empire*'s title sequence, the audience can anticipate what lies ahead and can appreciate that it is the illegality of the substance that produces the mayhem catalogued in the series. The major difference is that whereas the violence and corruption brought by Prohibition was isolated to the United States, the global prohibition of drugs has meant the same conditions now occur worldwide.

Conclusion

Time and again throughout *Boardwalk Empire* the point is made that the desires of the ordinary American consumer are an unstoppable force, particular in a nation with such veneration for capitalism and its potentialities, and that attempts to deny this truth only lead to widespread social harm. Although he actively seeks to undermine Prohibition, Nucky is also ignorant of how powerful the forces of untrammelled capitalism can be, and his ability to recover from this initial error is only possible once he allows the market to bend him to its will, rather than vice versa. In this regard he closely resembles Stringer Bell in *The Wire*, both in terms of the hubris they display in believing that they are in control of the marketplace, and the inability or unwillingness to perceive that the murderous actions they undertook to maintain their pre-eminence also set the stage for their destruction. The pressure to utilise every possible competitive advantage necessitates violence, which only intensifies as the series progresses and those with the most power look to increase their dominance. While the characters plot, scheme and fight amongst themselves, the demand for alcohol continues unabated, always promising greater and greater riches to anyone with the initiative or determination to take them. Even though Nucky is aware of how much he has lost because of the promise of almost unbounded wealth, he has become so immersed in the logic of the marketplace that he cannot tear himself away.

In this regard the centripetal narrative complexity of the Nucky storyline is highly beneficial, as it facilitates the depiction of gradual corruption and isolation that Nucky undergoes, while also emphasising the extent to which the character is unable to change. From the very start of the series, there exists considerable tension regarding whether Nucky will be able to maintain the lifestyle, social position and moral outlook that he become accustomed to, or whether the change in conditions brought about by Prohibition will require renegotiations on any or all of those points. Nucky desires stasis – his preferred vision for how Prohibition should function

involves everything staying the same as it was except that he makes a lot more money. The naiveté of this expectation is swiftly demonstrated within the diegesis, but Nucky never really loses his prelapsarian fantasy of how things were, even as the demands of the bootlegging trade compel him further and further away from it. In this respect the centripetal narration emphasises both the hardening of Nucky as a character (half-gangster into full-gangster) in terms of the Prohibition context, while still demonstrating the internal conflict existing behind those decisions. The centripetal narrative gives the viewer far greater access to Nucky than any other character, providing a strong sense of how reluctant and conflicted he is about the brutality required to stay competitive in the illicit marketplace. The centrifugal narrative provides the context that demonstrates why resorting to violence is both useful and necessary, and how ultimately Nucky is always drawn further into the mayhem of bootlegging, either because of the greed and volatility of his competitors, or his own inability to pass up a deal (even when the consequences are obvious and unwanted). As the series continues, the centripetal narrative becomes even more prominent, emphasising how isolated and mournful Nucky has become as a result of continuing in the bootlegging trade, and how lethal it has been for those who have been close to him. The centripetal narrative focus on Nucky ends up being the means by which the series demonstrates the personal cost that involvement in Prohibition can claim.

For Luciano and Lansky, there is never any suggestion that they might find a happier and more content life if only they could leave the black market behind and settle down. Instead they are pure creatures of the marketplace, embracing its potential and refusing to ever believe that there is such a thing as 'enough money'. Instead, even while Prohibition is filling their coffers they are already anticipating where they can make money next, and the fact that it is heroin that they turn to should hardly be surprising. Luciano and Lansky are shown to instinctively appreciate that the same conditions that made bootlegging so profitable are all in place when it comes to heroin, and while the customer base will start small, when Prohibition is over the market will suddenly become a lot more valuable. The link between Luciano, Lansky and heroin not only

gestures towards the historical importance of their partnership in American criminal history – it also forms the connective tissue that attaches the conditions inaugurated by alcohol Prohibition to those existing in relation to contemporary drug prohibition, for those inclined to draw the comparison. This point may have been less convincing had the series not spent a significant part of three seasons representing heroin and alcohol as comparable commodities, often traded and transported alongside one another by the same people. In this respect, the series appears to endorse the perspective being taken by this thesis – when considering the illicit marketplace, what really matters is not what is prohibited, but that it is prohibited.

In the Nucky storyline, the centripetal narration helped establish the distance between the public, gangster version of Nucky and the private costs that he has to bear as a consequence. With Luciano and Lansky, it is notable that the two men are never shown to have lives that exist outside of some criminal enterprise or other. Even moments that involve some character elaboration (such as Lansky describing his first encounters with Luciano) come in the context of negotiating business deals. While Luciano becomes less volatile and violent as the series continues, character change is very limited for both characters, since the consistency and stability of the partnership is crucial to the overall articulation of the Prohibition era being advanced. Through the first four seasons it is the combination of far-sightedness (represented by involvement in the heroin trade) and disregard for tradition (represented by the separate ethnic backgrounds) that emphasise the importance of the duo. By the time the final season reaches the moment of their ultimate triumph, the underlying conditions that allowed them to get there have already been well-established. The centrifugal narrative allows Luciano and Lansky to remain representationally consistent throughout the series, acting as heralds of the future that Prohibition will bring about, and that they will come to dominate.

Chapter 4: *Breaking Bad*

This chapter addresses the representation of prohibition in the AMC series *Breaking Bad*.

Breaking Bad is the story of chemistry teacher Walter White, who learns on his fiftieth birthday that he has lung cancer and responds to this discovery by plunging into the illegal market in crystal methamphetamine in order to accumulate a nest egg for his family to live on after he dies. He teams up with a minor drug dealer and former student, Jesse Pinkman, and over the course of the story Walt rises erratically up the ranks of the drug trade until his family discover his secret life, and his world collapses around him. The series employs a particularly expressive aesthetic scheme that works in combination with the heavily centripetal narrative complexity to create a series where the audience's alignment with the central character is exceptionally close, while the audience's allegiance is constantly being tested.

In *The Wire* the centrifugal narrative was expansive and provided a vast range of experiences and perspectives, both in relation to prohibition, and more generally. This broad canvas ensures that no individual character's story is likely to dominate the series as a whole, since it is constantly in rotation with many others. In *Boardwalk Empire* the centripetal narrative keeps the viewer closely aligned with Nucky, which provides a close-up view of how the conditions of alcohol Prohibition influence him as an individual. Alongside this specific story of the fictional Nucky Thompson, the centrifugal narrative drive that governs the other characters provides the kind of broad context found in *The Wire*, allowing for a more expansive and sweeping account of the historical period than is afforded by paying close attention to Nucky. However, in *Breaking Bad* the draw of the centripetal narrative is far more powerful than in the other series and there is consequently much less emphasis on the wider social or political context. The

question of how this affects the representation of prohibition will be one of the central concerns of this chapter.

In *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* there are numerous characters who go from being outside of the prohibited marketplace to participants in it, or who move from lower-ranking positions to higher-ranking ones. In each case these characters are not positioned as exceptional – instead they are poor, working-class, ethnic minorities for whom the illicit marketplace offers better options than legitimate capitalist society. Conversely, in *Breaking Bad* all the main characters are middle class and white, and while there are numerous working-class Latino characters featured throughout the series, they very rarely merit significant screen time or audience alignment. Walt does not enter into the drug trade because his upbringing, education or social position place limitations on his ability to access any other career, but because it represents the best opportunity to make large profits in a contracted time frame. Walt's desperation is not one borne of immediate material necessity, but rather is a calculation based on the responsibility he feels, as a husband and father, to provide for his family long after he has gone. Just as relevant is the fact that Walt's extremely wealthy old work colleagues, Gretchen (Jessica Hecht) and Elliot (Adam Godley), offer to pay for his treatment in its entirety, but Walt is too proud and resentful to allow them to do so (he merely tells his family that they do). Almost nothing about the way the show is set up suggests there is anything typical about the story being told, and the lack of centrifugal narration limits how much of the wider context can be apprehended.

The centrality of the illegal drug trade storyline means that many of the issues related to drug prohibition are portrayed in detail throughout the narrative of *Breaking Bad*. What is significant, as I shall explore, is how the show repeatedly frustrates attempts to identify a particular perspective on the subject. There are several scenes that appear to be encouraging the viewer to understand the series as a conscious engagement with prohibition as a system, but without the point being developed with any substance. A representative illustration of this comes in the

second season (s02e05), when Walt, his son Walt Jr (R. J. Mitte), and his DEA brother-in-law Hank (Dean Norris) are in Hank's backyard discussing the shootout with Tuco (Raymond Cruz);

Hank: You know what it is? Cockroach comes out from under the fridge, what do you do? I mean, you don't think about it. Stomp 'em down.

Walt: Where do they come from? Criminals, like the one you... I mean what do you think it is that makes them who they are?

Hank: Buddy, you might as well be asking about the roaches. All I know is there's a whole lot out there.

This exchange clearly raises questions about the essence of criminality, particularly as it pertains to the drug trade, only for the subject to be closed down and left undeveloped. None of this is problematic from a character perspective – Walt's interest is obvious, as is Hank's disinclination to consider the causes that might account for the Tucos of the world. What is less clear is whether the scene is meant to signal a particular perspective on the subject, or whether the series is just offering the question to the audience as food for thought, without feeling any compulsion to develop these ideas further.

A similar example occurs in an earlier episode (s01e07), when Walt and Hank are discussing the fact that alcohol used to be illegal during Prohibition, while methamphetamines used to be legally available over the counter at pharmacies. As Paul Manning writes, Walt suggests "that the line between legal and illegal enterprise, licit and illicit drugs, is simply 'arbitrary'. This is the closest the show comes to deconstructing the social construction of drug regulation"²⁸². As with the previous scene, larger debates regarding crime and prohibition are raised by the characters in a way that appears to be alerting the audience to the importance of what is being discussed, only for the subject to be swiftly closed down by another character and left

²⁸² Paul Manning, *Drugs and Popular Culture in the Age of New Media*, (New York: Routledge, 2014), p. 52.

undeveloped. A similar example comes in the third season, when the two trained chemists Walt and Gale (David Costabile) discuss the chain of events that lead them to being Gus' cooks. As part of the discussion Gale states that "I'm definitely a libertarian. Consenting adults want what they want, and if I'm not supplying it, they will get it somewhere else. At least with me, they're getting exactly what they pay for. No added toxins or adulterants". This is the only occasion in the series where any of the characters suggests that their opposition to prohibition might stem from ideological conviction, rather than the kind of self-interest that seems to be a factor in Walt's attitude. Once again, this notion is articulated briefly before the conversation swiftly moves on and the subject is never raised again. The recurrence of such moments loosely resembles moments in *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* where characters openly discuss the social and political construction of prohibition, and the series then proceeds to illustrate and develop these ideas within the on-going narrative. *Breaking Bad* makes similar gestures to the larger context, but then seems to avoid engaging with these issues more broadly. The wider context is evoked, but not developed.

These differences have necessitated that a different strategy be pursued in this chapter in order to better articulate those aspects of the series that have the greatest significance to the representation of prohibition. In each case study, the approach taken is motivated by the formal and thematic properties of the individual text, even though each section shares a similar focus on the representation of prohibition and how it is influenced by aspects of narrative and aesthetic construction. The scope of *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* made the task of selecting examples a matter of compression and evocation – while the examples selected struck the author as the most significant, they also do not form a complete account of how prohibition is represented in each series. With *Breaking Bad* the centripetal narrative force limits the extent to which the more systemic aspects of prohibition can be articulated, with the emphasis being more on the psychological pressures and burdens experienced by the core group of characters, and Walt in particular. In the other chapters, part of the analysis of prohibition involved understanding

characters as archetypes or embodiments of certain viewpoints. By tracing the development of these issues throughout the course of the series, it becomes possible to see how these characters function within the wider narrative and within the thematic terrain being addressed. Attempts to pursue a similar approach in relation to *Breaking Bad* were consistently unproductive, and consequently this chapter adopts a different perspective to the text.

The literature review addressed two aspects of textual analysis that are particularly important in developing an understanding of *Breaking Bad* and its representation of prohibition, namely the concept of ‘moments’ and the importance of re-watching television series. While the use of ‘moments’ to illustrate more sustained arguments is a fairly common practice within expressive criticism, the emphasis in this chapter is closer to the account given by Brown and Walters. The focus on moments allows a major thematic aspect of each *Breaking Bad* season to be discussed in a way that provides detailed representational analysis without the necessity of an overall argument or through line, as with the other case studies. It also places greater emphasis on the close reading of elements of style and how they complicate the interpretation of various recurring motifs and ideas. *Breaking Bad* is particularly expressive in its aesthetic construction and employs a range of devices over the course of its run that convey meaning beyond what is otherwise contained in the text. The emphasis on close reading specific moments from each season stems from a desire to provide the best possible articulation of the representational tendencies the series’ possesses. This is coupled with an emphasis on how re-watching the series can fundamentally alter its interpretation, providing a degree of distance between the audience and the central character that can radically alter the understanding of various characters’ motivations.

The structure of the chapter involves extended close textual analyses of scenes from each of the five seasons of *Breaking Bad*, each one addressing a particular aspect of the representation of prohibition within the series, and the interpretive challenges they pose. The first section

addresses how the use of cross-cutting, flashback, colour, mise-en-scene and dialogue establishes the emphasis on questions of morality rather than social context that guides the series' representation of prohibition. The second section addresses the series' most significant visual motif – the use of Walt's reflection to highlight his increasingly split personality, exemplified by his use of the name 'Heisenberg' as a *nom de guerre*. The third section focuses on the representation of the Salamanca brothers and how the series engages, or fails to engage, with its proximity to the Mexican border and the cartel violence that lurks on the other side. The fourth section is the most substantial and involves sustained close reading of several scenes from the fourth season, which together demonstrate how ambiguity is built into the foundation of the series, making it a challenging object for representational analysis. The final section considers the ending of the series, and once more indicates how the series remains determinedly equivocal, even in its final moments.

Season One: The Chemical Composition of the Human Body

This first scene selected comes at the start of the third episode of the series (s01e03), and is the first time that the audience is presented with a flashback to Walt's past. The scene is the cold open to the episode and features Walt and Jesse cleaning up the dissolved body of Emilio (John Koyama), a drug dealer Walt killed in self-defence in the pilot. Jesse had attempted to dissolve Emilio in acid in the previous episode but the acid ate through the bath and the floorboards, depositing the partially dissolved remains into the hallway below. The clean-up operation is cross-cut with a flashback featuring Walt and an unknown woman (who we later learn is his old business partner and lover, Gretchen) going through a list of all the elements to be found in the human body in their relative amounts. The scene opens with a succession of POV shots from under the floorboards of the remains of Emilio being mopped up (fig. 44), followed by a shot of

Walt's exhausted face which the camera tracks in on as Walt's voice from the past is heard saying "let's break it down".

The action then cuts to the flashback, clearly distinct from the present-day scenes thanks to the cool blue filter that dominates the *mise-en-scène* (fig. 45). The track into Walt's present-day face suggests that this is a memory that he is recalling at the moment he is cleaning up human remains, inviting the audience to consider the relationship between the two events. The first connection is suggested by the first line of dialogue – Walt saying "let's break it down". He is referring to the intellectual exercise of accounting for the elemental composition of the human body (hydrogen 63%, oxygen 26%, etc) to see what there is and in what abundance. Yet in the context of the present-day cleanup, the idea of 'breaking down' the human body takes on a very different tone as it clearly relates to the attempted 'break down' or decomposition of Emilio's body by the acid. The crosscutting between past and present helps to further contrast the two scenes – Walt in the past considers the body academically and scientifically, seeing it as an amalgamation of different chemical elements that add up to a whole (or almost a whole). In the present Walt is dealing with the body on an extremely physical, visceral level where it has been reduced to its most basic, fleshy reality. At one point past-Walt expresses incredulity at how little calcium is needed despite there being "a whole skeleton to account for"; words that are heard in an audio loop as present-day Walt picks up a piece of Emilio's jawbone, making the crosscutting seem excessively morbid or even macabrely humorous²⁸³. When Walt finishes writing and then adds up the various percentages it comes to a total of 99.888042%. Looking at the numbers Walt seems dissatisfied, commenting that "it seems like something's missing, doesn't it? There's got to be more to a human being than that".

²⁸³ The next element mentioned is iron, which is crosscut with a shot of Walt picking up Emilio's partially dissolved handgun, adding to the tonally complex mix of grotesquery and black humour.



Fig. 43

Margaret sees the true face of the monster she married.

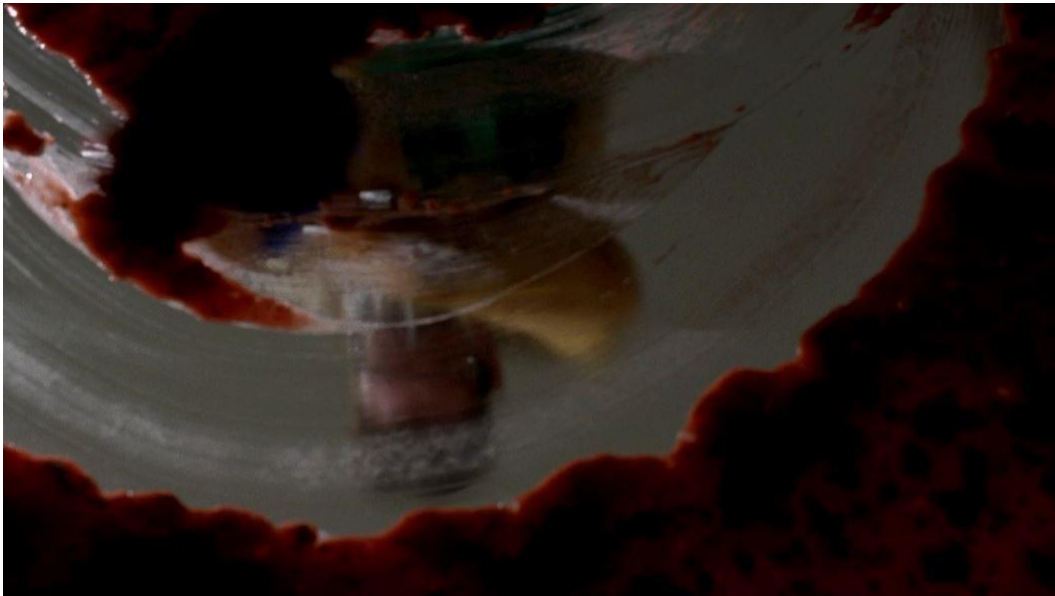


Fig. 44

Cleaning up human remains from Jesse's floorboards.



Fig. 45

Walt's chemical composition flashback.

This idea that there is something more to a human being than what can be accounted for by empirical evidence implicitly invokes the idea of the soul – in particular the idea that the soul actually has some kind of physical presence in the world. This is explicitly suggested by Gretchen when the flashback returns at the end of the episode, following Walt's murder of Krazy-8 (Max Arciniega), Emilio's cousin. While the idea of the soul may be of only theoretical interest to the characters in the flashback, for Walt in the present such ideas suddenly feel very relevant and difficult. The tone of the scene pulls in a number of directions by making the disposal of the body so visceral and gory while crosscutting it with a scene that is primarily intellectual. The strong light blue filter used to differentiate the flashback from the present day adds to the sense of contrast between the scenes, making the dark glutinous red of Emilio's remains nauseatingly distinct. Even the settings provide a clear contrast; the flashback takes place in a classroom with large glass walls, whereas Jesse's house has dark wooden floors and beige plastered walls.

The uncanny and macabre elements of this sequence are most vividly captured in the final shot, which sees Walt in LS standing over the toilet, bloody bucket in hand, wearing a blood-smeared green apron, industrial yellow safety gloves and a gas mask (fig. 46). The unsettling tone of the shot is emphasised and enhanced by the *mise-en-scène* and set dressing of Jesse's bathroom. Jesse inherited his house from his aunt, and the layout of the bathroom has clearly not been changed since Jesse moved in, so it is very much a domestic, feminine space with flowers, ornaments, floral curtains, and bright pastel colours on the walls. The window is open letting in sunlight, the sky outside is bright with a clear blue sky, and in the middle of the room stands Walt pouring the last remains of Emilio into a domestic toilet. In an almost uncanny visual match, Walt's yellow shirt and yellow protective gloves blend harmoniously with the yellow pastel shade on the far wall, in front of which he is standing. Even the shade of the blood pouring out of the bucket is very close in colour to the rose coloured walls on either side of Walt making the blood-stained green apron the only colour that really sets Walt apart from his

surroundings. The use of colour makes Walt seem at once completely at home in the surroundings and disturbingly alien. Of course in one sense it would seem completely fitting that Walt should appear at home in this environment – even though it is Jesse's house his personality is absent from this room. Instead it is very clearly a suburban middle-class home decorated with suburban middle-class taste, which in many ways is not much different from the decoration of Walt's own home, so it is hardly surprising that he seems to blend in well with it. The jarring juxtaposition between the image of middle-class suburbia and the equipment of industrial chemistry works so well because it is not just a contrast between the surrounding and the individual but because that contrast is taken down to the level of the individual himself. In this environment Walt is both resident and alien.

These associations are invoked without being made explicit, so that the audience is being primed to consider the ideas of sin, the soul, redemption, damnation, mortality and morality even before the episode proper has begun. It means that when Walt is left contemplating whether or not to kill Krazy-8, the viewer really has a sense of the weight of his decision and the possible issues at stake, so they are better able to decide whether to empathise with or condemn Walt's actions. Consequently, when the flashback returns, all these ideas are immediately accessible, and are made even more relevant by Gretchen asking “what about the soul?” as a solution to their inability to account for 100% of the body. Walt's response, “the soul... there's nothing but chemistry here” works as both a pun (Walt delivers the line leaning over Gretchen in a way that clearly demonstrates some sort of romantic attraction or involvement, hence ‘chemistry’ in the sense of sexual attraction) and a demonstration of Walt's lack of interest in such non-scientific notions, at least in the past. However, that was when such notions had no real weight in his life – nothing Walt the young academic was doing at that time had much obvious relevance to issues of morality or good and evil. Now, in the present day, Walt is shown looking off into the endless horizon have just choked a man to death with a bike lock. In happier days the idea of the soul

was one he had no interest in – now it suddenly seems to have taken on an importance and a resonance with Walt that is both profound and immediate, given the events of the past 48 hours.

This scene can potentially be understood as a compressed version of the process experienced by Nucky Thompson in *Boardwalk Empire*. Both Walt and Nucky want to make money via the prohibited marketplace and believe they can do so without the need for violence, before coming to realise that this is not possible under the prevailing conditions. The difference is that it takes almost two seasons for Nucky to personally murder someone, whereas Walt is compelled to do so almost as soon as he enters the drug trade. Instead of taking place across several seasons, Walt's understanding of the inescapable violence of his new profession is extremely acute – the shocking reality of what the drug trade really entails is made almost immediately apparent and visceral. The deaths of Emilio and Krazy-8 propel the narrative centripetally, aligning the audience even more closely to Walt's subjectivity by giving them access not only to his emotions but also to his memories. Any sense that Walt's experience is meant to be understood as a representative example of the prevailing conditions of the drug trade is undermined by how specific and personal Walt's responses are. Even more so than Nucky, Walt is shown to be grappling with the moral immensity of the choices he has been forced to make, and which he is utterly unprepared for.

The first season of *Breaking Bad* is substantially concerned with emphasising how risky and unpleasant life can be at the bottom of the drug trade, particularly when one is inexperienced and attempting to make money from it as quickly as possible. A great deal of suspense and unease is generated due to how vulnerable Walt and Jesse are because they lack toughness, whereas their competitors seem almost excessively eager to be violent. In the first season there are two occasions when Jesse is tasked with taking his and Walt's meth to high-level dealers capable of moving significant amounts of drugs quickly. On both occasions Jesse is shown to be considerably out of his depth, with the result being that he is robbed and violently attacked, so

that Walt has to go to extreme measures to maintain the viability of their operation. With Emilio and Krazy-8, he is able to improvise on the spot by forcing them to inhale noxious chemical fumes, but with the more prominent and unstable Tuco his response is far more calculated and daring, as he walks straight into Tuco's hideout and causes an explosion of sufficient violence that he leaves with the money he is owed and the promise of a continued business relationship. Walt gains Tuco's respect not because of the quality of the meth he produces but because he shows a level of violent unpredictability on par with that displayed by Tuco – something that the fundamentally gentle Jesse is unable to call upon. While the point is never overtly emphasised, these incidents do make a powerful case for the idea that violence is not only unavoidable in the drug trade, it is the most effective way of building a reputation and gaining respect from those who might otherwise do you harm. This is one of the main points of overlap between the representation of prohibition in all three series, even though each case study places different degrees of emphasis on the psychological experience of committing violence and the moral questions it brings into play. This aspect of the series' conception of prohibition is forcefully made in the first season, but it comes to fruition in the following seasons in relation to the series' most significant aesthetic motif.

Season Two: The Meeting of Doppelgangers

The scene to be discussed in this section occurs after Walt and Jesse try to make contact with a potential distributor, later revealed as Gustavo Fring (Giancarlo Esposito), at a Los Pollos Hermanos chicken restaurant (s02e11). When the meeting fails to take place, Walt decides to return to the restaurant the following day and wait there until late into the evening, in the hope that whoever he was supposed to meet will reveal themselves. This scene involves an aspect of the mise-en-scène that reoccurs repeatedly throughout *Breaking Bad*'s earlier seasons, namely the appearance of Walt's doppelganger, Heisenberg. Walt first names his alter-ego in Tuco's

office, moments before he causes the violent explosion that gains Tuco's respect and establishes their brief professional partnership. However, the idea that Walt has a doppelganger, and that this allows him to behave and act in ways that the mild and milquetoast Walter White cannot is something that emerges in the pilot episode. To understand the meaning of the Heisenberg alter-ego, it is necessary to gain a brief appreciation of the real Heisenberg, as well as how the series uses Walt's science lessons as metaphors to outline the essential premise of the show.

Werner Heisenberg was a German physicist who is most famous for elucidating an aspect of quantum mechanics known as the 'uncertainty principle'. This, as Bill Bryson explains it, is a feature of subatomic physics which,

States that the electron is a particle but a particle that can be described in terms of waves. The uncertainty around which the theory is built is that we can know the path an electron takes as it moves through a space or we can know where it is at a given instant, but we cannot know both. Any attempt to measure one will unavoidably disturb the other. This isn't a matter of simply needing more precise instruments; it is an immutable property of the universe.²⁸⁴

The precise details of the uncertainty principle are not required to understand the way that the concept is utilised in *Breaking Bad*; what is necessary is to appreciate the idea of an entity (Walter White) that has the potential to be viewed or understood as one of two entirely separate states. In the subatomic world this means that a particle like an electron or photon can potentially be viewed as a wave or as a particle, but not both at the same time. In like manner, when the audience observes the character being played by Bryan Cranston the possibility also exists that they are seeing either the future drug kingpin Heisenberg, or the beleaguered family-man Walter White.

²⁸⁴ Bill Bryson, *A Short History of Nearly Everything*, New York: Random House, 2003), pp. 96-97.

This potential for Walt to be both himself and someone else simultaneously is conveyed throughout the early seasons of the show by the presence of a doppelganger – reflections of Walt in mirrors or other shiny surfaces that occur in moments when Walt seems to fluctuate between his two personas. The very first time the reflection motif appears in the series is in the pilot (s01e01), when Walt’s face is reflected in the doctor’s desk as he is being given his initial cancer diagnosis, thus indelibly connecting Walt’s second self to his truncated life expectancy (fig. 47). Two scenes later, the potential consequences of this new dual-personality are evident when Walt furiously quits his job at the car wash by cursing at the owner and knocking an array of air fresheners to the floor. This scene then leads into Walt asking to go with Hank on a DEA operation, which leads to him seeing Jesse flee the crime scene, which leads to the establishment of their partnership and Walt giving Jesse all his savings in order to buy the RV. The subsequent scene marks the second appearance of the doppelganger motif and this time the connection between the reflection and the appearance of Walt’s angry, aggressive alter-ego is made apparent. Walt goes to help his disabled son put on jeans in a changing room, where his reflection is clearly visible (fig. 48), and then Walt is reflected in another mirror when the family are scrutinising the jeans outside of the changing room (fig. 49), while three bullies audibly mock Walt Jr’s cerebral palsy. Walt stops Skyler (Anna Gunn) from confronting the bullies herself, but then turns and walks towards the back of the store, out of sight of the camera. As Skyler decides to go over to the bullies, Walt suddenly enters at the front of the store, marches straight over to the bullies and kicks the most obnoxious member to the ground before stamping on his ankle. He then stares down his victim while uttering a series of challenging, tough-guy provocations before the bullies back down and leave. Thus the aggrieved but impotent Walter White is seen leaving by the back door and the violent, indomitable Heisenberg arriving through the front to act with the conviction and aggression that Walt has never been able to muster²⁸⁵. This is anticipated by the appearance of the doppelganger.

²⁸⁵ The idea of impotence and potency is directly addressed in the pilot, which ends with Walt and Skyler

A similar event occurs three episodes later (s01e04) when the victim of Walt's alter-ego is a loathsome businessman (Kyle Bornheimer) whom Walt first encounters at his bank, where he steals Walt's parking spot and then stands in line talking loudly and crudely on a Bluetooth headset ("she's a cow, Stacey's a cow. I'm talking major barnyard boo-hog. Roll her in flour and look for the wet spot before you hit that"). A couple of days later, Walt sees him again at a petrol station and when the man leaves his convertible BMW (with a personalised license plate that reads 'KEN WINS')unattended, Walt strides over to it clearly determined to cause mischief. Noticing a metal windscreen cleaner, he leans into the car and pops the hood, at which point Walt's reflection can be seen in the windshield of the car (fig. 50). He opens the hood and places the metal frame across the battery terminals, before closing the lid and walking away as the car explodes behind him.

These two scenes are important in establishing the idea that even before Walt shaves his head and purchases his pork pie hat (which will become the iconic signifiers of the Heisenberg persona) the cancer diagnosis has already unleashed the doppelganger who will grow to dominate Walt's life. However, they also serve to create a complex emotional attachment between the audience and Walt/Heisenberg, encouraging sympathy for Walt while also providing a pleasurable thrill at his new-found vitality and decisiveness. In both examples the targets of Walt's ire are set up as socially obnoxious caricatures so pronounced that the audience is hard pressed to object to their comeuppances at Walt/Heisenberg's hand. Walt's abrupt shifts in character (which will soon become explicitly associated with the Heisenberg persona) act as a form of wish-fulfilment for the viewer and establish the idea that Walt's diagnosis has released him from his ineffectual, dreary existence. What is particularly interesting about the destruction of Ken's car is that this occurs after Walt has murdered Krazy-8, so that the audience has

passionately having sex – something obviously intended to be contrasted with an earlier sex scene where Skyler dispassionately gave Walt a handjob for his birthday while watching auctions on eBay.



Fig. 46

The uncanny contrast between the figure of Walt and his surroundings.



Fig. 47

The first Heisenberg reflection appears at the moment of diagnosis.



Fig. 48

Walt helps his disabled son, while his doppelganger appears in the mirror.



Fig. 49

The family considers Walt Jr's jeans while Heisenberg spots his first victims.



Fig. 50

Walt's doppelganger can be seen in the windshield of KENWINS' car.



Fig. 51

Walt in the Heisenberg hat.



Fig. 52

Heisenberg in the Heisenberg hat.



Fig. 53

Walt attempts to discard his alter-ego.



Fig. 54

Walt's assault on Skyler.

already experienced the incredibly dark side to this alternate persona, yet the creators still set up the scene to make Walt's actions enjoyable (including the obligatory action-movie tough-guy shot of Walt stoically walking away from the car as it explodes). The audience is encouraged to enjoy the spectacle of Heisenberg's vitality, efficiency and coolness; all the qualities that Walter White lacks. This fluctuation between revulsion and attraction is what will increasingly define the audience's relationship to Walt – the viewer is repulsed by Walt/Heisenberg's immorality, but thrilled by his display of ingenuity, daring and vigour. The audience is thus invited to compare the duality of Walt's character with that of their own response.

The second episode of the first season (s01e02) proffers an explanation for Walt's character transformation, employing another analogy drawn from science. Walt is shown teaching his chemistry class about chiral bonds – a piece of chemistry that acts as a perfect metaphor for Walt's personal transformation that in many ways is a superior way of expressing the same notion as that provided by the Heisenberg uncertainty principle metaphor. As Walt explains to his class;

Walt: So the term 'chiral' derives from the Greek word 'hand'. Now the concept here being that just as your left hand and your right hand are mirror images of one other, right? Identical and yet opposite. Well so too organic compounds can exist as mirror image forms of one another all the way down at the molecular level. But, although they may look the same, they don't always behave the same. For instance, thalidomide. The right-handed isomer of the drug thalidomide is a perfectly fine, good medicine to give to a pregnant woman to prevent morning sickness, but make the mistake of giving that same pregnant woman the left-handed isomer of the drug thalidomide and her child will be born with horrible birth defects. Which is precisely what happened in the 1950s. So, chiral, chirality, mirrored images, right? Active-inactive, good-bad...

Walt trails off because he is grappling with his own very fundamental questions of good and bad at that moment (as explained in the previous section), but what is most relevant is the idea of something that looks the same, but behaves very differently. Walt is the good, safe version of thalidomide, while Heisenberg is the bad, poisonous mirror image – hence the importance of reflections in identifying when the two versions are in moments of flux. Later on in the first season, another chemistry lesson is used to expand upon the nature of the transformation that Walt is personally going through when he discusses the power of chemical reactions. Walt explains that when a chemical change occurs slowly the amount of energy being produced will be almost imperceptible, but when a change occurs rapidly, the reaction can be explosive and violent. Here the implication is that Walt's personality shift is occurring rapidly because of the urgency prompted by the diagnosis and his money concerns, and consequently the change prompted by these events is likely to have violent consequences. The scene is relevant because the substance Walt offers as an example of a quick and explosive chemical reaction is fulminated mercury, which Walt will use later (s01e06) in the episode to cause the explosion in Tuco's office (the place where he first gives a name to his alter-ego).

What these various chemical metaphors help establish is that the cancer diagnosis has acted as a catalyst for a profound change that has happened within Walt, as he has split his personality into the good chemistry teacher and the bad drug dealer, and that this change has the potential to be explosive and violent because of the speed with which it is occurring. What the doppelganger reflections indicate to the audience is that Walt is not fully in control of Heisenberg – it is a side of Walt that existed before Walt choose to create it, as evidenced by the initial appearance on the doctor's desk in the pilot episode. Walt's inability to contain Heisenberg is made uncomfortably evident in the second season (s02e01) when Walt comes home after witnessing Tuco beat one of his subordinates to death for talking out of turn. This scene is important in establishing a second visual trope of the Walt/Heisenberg duality, which it does in a way that

also makes it clear that Walt will find it increasingly difficult to separate the two worlds he inhabits.

Skyler is in her bathroom applying face cream when she hears Walt come in and goes down the hall to find him standing in front of the TV wearing the Heisenberg hat and unresponsively flicking channels, clearly still traumatised by what he has just witnessed. In an over the shoulder shot Skyler notices the new hat (fig. 51) and then moves out of the frame, leaving Walt standing in profile. There is a subtle shift in lighting as Skyler exits the frame (fig. 52), but it is enough to increase the contrast between dark and light on Walt's face, which is further emphasised by the black hat and Walt's dark jacket. While the lighting changes only slightly, it is important because it foreshadows what happens next, which will help cement this use of heavily contrasted sides of Walt's face as the new visual trope for indicating the 'uncertainty principle' idea that Walt and Heisenberg are present at the same moment, depending on which side of the face the observer focuses on. This shot then cuts to a position on top of the television unit as Walt removes his hat and places it just in front of the camera so that the hat occupies a large portion of the frame (fig. 53). The removal of the hat should (if Walt really does control the movement between himself and Heisenberg) indicate the moment where Walt detaches himself from the trauma he has experienced in the drug world and returns to the domestic sphere, but this is not what happens. Instead, Walt goes over to Skyler and embraces her, but then begins to urgently initiate sex while Skyler protests that she is wearing a green face mask and that Walt Jr will arrive home from school imminently. Walt ignores these objections and continues to roughly force himself on her, only halting when he knocks her into the fridge and she yells at him repeatedly to stop (fig. 54).

Walt's reaction to his own behaviour strongly suggests that he is as appalled by the violence he has displayed as Skyler is – once again suggesting that he is not fully in command of his darker tendencies. The lighting change is thus revealed to be a visual cue for the audience that indicates

the presence of both sides of Walt existing alongside one another, with neither fully in control of the other. In later seasons the visual cues that alert the audience to the Walt/Heisenberg uncertainty mostly fall away, but there are still notable moments when Walt loses composure and accidentally allows his darker alter-ego to seep into the domestic sphere. Most notable is the occasion when Skyler is imploring Walt to consider turning himself into the police because of the threat posed by Gus (s04e06), which prompts a forceful and revelatory speech from Walt;

Walt: Who are you talking to right now? Who is it you think you see? Do you know how much I make in a year? I mean even if I told you, you wouldn't believe it. Do you know what would happen if I suddenly decided to stop going into work? A business big enough that it could be listed on the NASDAQ would go belly-up. Disappears. It ceases to exist without me. No, you clearly don't know who you're talking to, so let me clue you in. I am not in danger, Skyler. I am the danger. A guy opens his door and gets shot, and you think that of me? No. I am the one who knocks.

At this stage of the series, it no longer becomes plausible to speak distinctly of Walt and Heisenberg as distinguishable entities, because Walt has lived with his doppelganger long enough that no clear distinction exists between them anymore. In this scene, what is paramount is Walt's ego – despite the nature of his work, he is clearly proud of his importance and value and wants Skyler to acknowledge how impressive he is. Moreover, he bristles at the suggestion that he is inferior to or incapable of resisting a genuine criminal mastermind like Gus, which makes him over-emphasise his toughness in a way that clearly terrifies Skyler, as she flees the house with their baby as soon as Walt goes into the shower.

What is important to note about the doppelganger imagery used in the early seasons is that both Walt and his reflection are always in the frame together, emphasising the idea that they are two sides of the same coin and that they co-exist. In later seasons this motif disappears as the Heisenberg side of Walt becomes dominant. For example, after Walt receives the news that his

cancer treatment is working (s02e09) he goes to the bathroom of the doctor's surgery and after catching sight of his reflection in a paper towel dispenser, begins furiously punching it until the reflection is distorted and unrecognisable (fig. 55&56) . Now that he has longer to live, Walt is less in need of his violent alter-ego and the attack on his own image (considered alongside the other uses of his reflection in the series up to this point) can easily be read as his attempt to eradicate his doppelganger and the pain and distress he brings. In the final season (s05e09), Walt is shown visiting the same bathroom again and being brought up short by the sight of the damaged towel dispenser (fig. 57&58). However, on this occasion the creators are careful to block the scene in such a way that Walt is not reflected in the dispenser, implying that the doppelganger motif no longer is relevant because his identity is no longer split. There is no more duality to Walter White because Heisenberg is all that is left.

However, this is not yet the case when Walt meets with Gus for the first time. Indeed, nowhere else in the series is the doppelganger motif more overtly employed than in this scene. In a succession of shots the use of reflections is amplified, almost as if the *mise-en-scène* is over-excited at the prospect of the two dual-personality drug dealers finally encountering one another. Even the Los Pollos Hermanos logo (which features two anthropomorphised chickens standing back-to-back) can be understood as a visual representation of the nature of Gus' business and existence. Superficially, Los Pollos Hermanos is a local chain of chicken restaurants owned by a mild-mannered pillar of the community, but in reality it is an elaborate cover for an extensive drug distribution network run by a brilliant drug lord. The presence of doppelgangers in this scene is therefore not only due to the Walt/Heisenberg duality, but also because that same duality is utilised by Gus. This makes the two men mirror images of each other, both living secret drug-world lives while maintaining respectable civilian occupations. Even before Walt exits his car, the restaurant logo can be seen reflected in his car window (fig. 59), then the shot cuts to him walking from car to restaurant, at which point Walt's reflection appears in one of the building's windows with the logo clearly visible above it (fig. 60). The action cuts inside and

Walt's reflection is once again visible in the gumball machines as he takes his seat and waits to see if anyone approaches him.

While Walt is waiting, there are further shots showing the Los Pollos Hermanos logo, ensuring that the doubling motif remains a constant presence even while nothing of note is happening in the scene. The key moment comes when the camera pans from Walt's face to his reflection in the window, the pan keeping the continuity between Walt and the doppelganger, at which point the reflection of Gus also appears (fig. 62). The camera's focus initially stays on Walt, but then for a brief moment Gus raises his head from his task and looks towards Walt, the moment emphasised by a slight shift of focus from Walt to Gus (fig. 63), before Gus turns away and continues with his cleaning and the camera refocuses back to Walt. The entire moment exists within one shot, but the small pan and the slight rack focus allow a great deal of meaning to be packed into the moment, particularly as the doppelganger imagery has been so prevalent up to this point. The most important feature of this shot is that the moment of recognition occurs in a reflection – particularly because, unlike all other appearances of the Heisenberg doppelganger, Walt himself is not contained within the frame at the same time. This is why the camera movement is so important; it keeps the continuity of the relationship between Walt and his doppelganger consistent, while emphasising that it is the hidden criminal personas that acknowledge one another, not the civilian ones. Walt's doppelganger is able to recognise its twin because the *mise-en-scène* allows the similarity between Walt and Gus to be manifested in the environment around them. The content of their discussion is far less relevant than the kinship expressed in the *mise-en-scène* – something that is ironic in retrospect, considering how adversarial the relationship between the two men will eventually become.

The Heisenberg/doppelganger motifs discussed above can be readily understood from a prohibition perspective, since the illegality of the drug trade makes the benefits of a pseudonym obvious, particularly for someone like Walt who is leading a double life. The fact that Walt



Fig. 55

Walt is in the frame while his face is reflected in the towel dispenser.



Fig. 56

Walt destroys his own reflection.

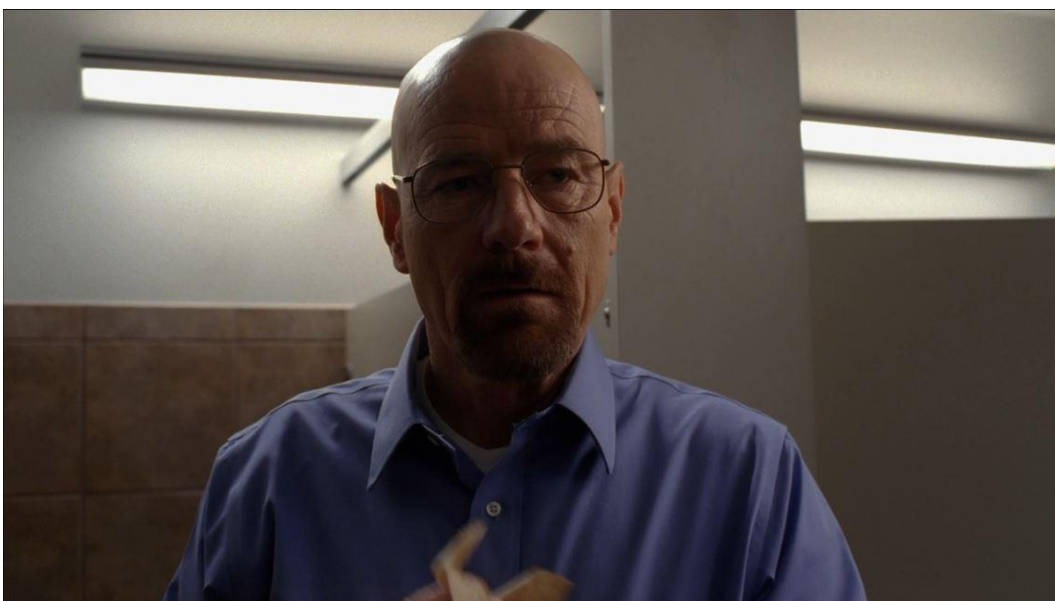


Fig. 57

Walt considers his previous work.



Fig. 58

At no point do Walt and his reflection appear at the same time – no more alter-ego.



Fig. 59

Los Pollos Hermanos reflection on Walt's car window.



Fig. 60

Walt's reflection appears in the restaurant window.



Fig. 61

Walt's reflection in the gumball machine.



Fig. 62

Walt's reflection registers Gus' reflection.



Fig. 63

Gus' reflection acknowledges Walt's – the doppelgangers meet.

seems unable to fully control the Heisenberg side of his personality could also appear to express the futility of Walt's belief that he can keep the domestic and criminal sides of his life separate. As the series progresses, the Heisenberg personality becomes so dominant that the doppelganger imagery gradually disappears and all that is left is the bad version of Walt. As discussed in the previous chapter the transformation of *Boardwalk Empire's* Nucky from crooked politician to ruthless gangster is intended to indicate the huge emotional and psychological cost extracted by the conditions of the illicit alcohol trade, and one could easily claim that the same argument is in effect here, in relation to drugs. The issue is that the contrast between the good Walt (father, husband, teacher) and the bad Heisenberg (drug dealer, murderer), and the eventual domination of the former by the latter, is not something which develops gradually, but is essential to the thematic structure of the series from the start. The bad side of Walt emerges before he ever sets foot in the drug trade, suggesting that his transformation has its roots in internal psychological and personality factors, rather than the external features of a prohibited marketplace. The moment at which, according to Jesse, Walt starts 'breaking bad' is when Walt expresses his desire to begin cooking meth. The fundamental 'badness' of the series, therefore, occurs before Walt ever breaks the law. In this view, Walt's badness is not a symptom produced by his involvement in the drug trade, it is something within him. The conditions produced by the prohibition of drugs are relevant only in that they enable individuals with cruel and violent sides to their nature to give those attributes full expression.

Either the pressures of the drug trade are so tremendous that they can transform a kind, gentle family man into a remorseless villain, or it is a milieu in which someone confronting their mortality and the frustrations and disappointments of their life can unleash the worst aspects of their personality. Both interpretations are plausible here, as they are throughout the series. Unlike *Boardwalk Empire* or *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad* seems to deliberately resist a single, cohesive interpretation and instead leaves the audience facing ambiguity and uncertainty about the creators' intent. Attempting to understand the doppelganger motif from a prohibition

perspective can be a rewarding experience, but it ultimately lacks the cohesion found in the other case studies. This tension will emerge again in the following section, which considers how the series utilises audience awareness of the brutal Mexican drug war without any real engagement with the wider issues such a subject invites.

Season Three: The Invasion

As already noted, one of the main reasons why *Breaking Bad* can be a challenging text to characterise in relation to its representation of prohibition is that the series invokes a range of prohibition-related phenomena, but without necessarily developing a discernible perspective on them. Chief among these is the representation of Mexico and the Mexican drug cartel that features heavily in the third and fourth seasons. Although few scenes take place in Mexico, the often horrifying events of the real-world Mexican drug war are incorporated into the story as the series progresses, increasing its scope and establishing a greater sense of threat. Yet there is some uncertainty regarding the interpretation of these scenes and the wider representation of prohibition within the series. The scene analysed in this section provides a basis for considering the potential critical readings that could be advanced in relation to the drug cartels and prohibition, and why determining whether any of them are relevant is so challenging.

There is a tradition of American-made film and television border narratives that characterise Mexico as a place of unfathomable barbarism and danger, threatening the security of the United States and its citizens. Camilla Fojas has argued that these kinds of “narco-border films target Latin American nations as producers and suppliers of drugs while relieving the United States of responsibility for its role as a consumer nation in the perpetuation of the drug trade”²⁸⁶. Critics writing from an anti-prohibition perspective argue that by refusing to acknowledge that it is the

²⁸⁶ Camilla Fojas, *Border Bandits: Hollywood on the Southern Frontier* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), p. 111.

lucrative American drug market that motivates much of the conflict between the cartels, such texts obscure the reality of the problem and perpetuate the ignorance of American audiences. Without an acknowledgement of the wider context, cartel violence becomes the product of pure evil, untethered to any other causes or stimuli that might at least suggest that it is a symptom of a larger problem. Yet even from this more critical perspective, it remains possible to view *Breaking Bad* as perpetuating the same kind of context-free myopia, or as critiquing the same thing.

The relevant scene occurs at the end of s03e02 when the Salamanca brothers (Daniel Moncada and Luis Moncada) turn up at Walt's house intent on extracting bloody revenge for Walt's part in the events that lead to the death of their cousin, Tuco. This moment is the culmination of a number of scenes spread across the first two episodes of the season. The brothers are first introduced crawling on their stomachs to a shrine in a small Mexican village (s03e01), where they attach a sketch of Heisenberg (complete with sunglasses and hat) and make an offering, apparently seeking a blessing for the murder they intend to commit (fig. 64&65). Later they are shown arriving at a remote house, where they leave their car and change out of their expensive suits into jeans and shirts they take from a washing line, while the family whose land they are on warily watch them. As with the earlier scene, there is a very obvious sense of incongruity created by the contrast of the brothers' high-end clothes, car and guns with the evident poverty of the landscape and people surrounding them (fig. 66). The soundtrack heightens the strange, unsettling feel of the scene, with its low discordant strings, irregular percussion sounds and strange, rattling echoes, all of which get higher in pitch as the duo advance on a young girl who has been watching them, only for one of the brothers to hook the keys of the Mercedes over the horn of a goat, before they stride off into the desert. In both scenes the music encourages a sense of foreboding, particularly as it gets higher in pitch and volume before dying away, giving the sense that the scene is building towards some climactic moment, and then frustrating that expectation. The use of a heavy yellow filter separates these scenes from the rest of the narrative

and helps to exacerbate the feeling of otherworldliness. The creepy, skull-heavy decoration of the shrine combines with the strong sense that the brothers do not fit comfortably within their surroundings to produce a tone of strangeness and menace, exacerbated by the clear impression that they are intently pursuing Walt. The fact that they are very similar in appearance (another example of the use of doubling within the series) yet appear very dissimilar from everyone else around them makes them seem like alien presences with malevolent but obscure intentions.

This general sense of menace is abundantly paid off in the final scene of the first episode which finds the brothers riding in the back of a truck with around a dozen illegal immigrants who are being smuggled across the border into America. As the brothers sit in silence, a young man chats away about his skills as a mechanic, until his attention is drawn to the boots that the brothers are wearing (the only clothing they did not replace, and thus ostentatiously expensive) which he admires until he notices the metal skull at the tip (fig. 67), at which point he falls suddenly silent and turns his face away from them. While the audience can still only guess at who these two men are, the reaction of the mechanic seems to suggest that the skull symbol identifies them as cartel members and thus extremely dangerous. This is almost immediately confirmed when the brothers abruptly execute everyone in the truck, along with the driver, before they set the truck ablaze and continue their journey on foot (fig. 68). The idea that these two men are willing to murder a dozen people simply because one of them recognised their cartel affiliation ramps up the apprehension experienced by the audience, while also serving to remind them of the barbarism of cartel drug violence.

This last point has already been well-established in the series by this point, thanks to Hank's experience working with the El Paso DEA on the front line of the Mexican drug war in the second season. By the start of the third season, Hank is still struggling to deal with the post-traumatic stress he suffered after seeing his colleagues maimed and killed by a cartel bomb contained within the decapitated head of a police informant (s02e07). That bizarre imagery (the



Fig. 64

The Salamance brothers crawl to the shrine.

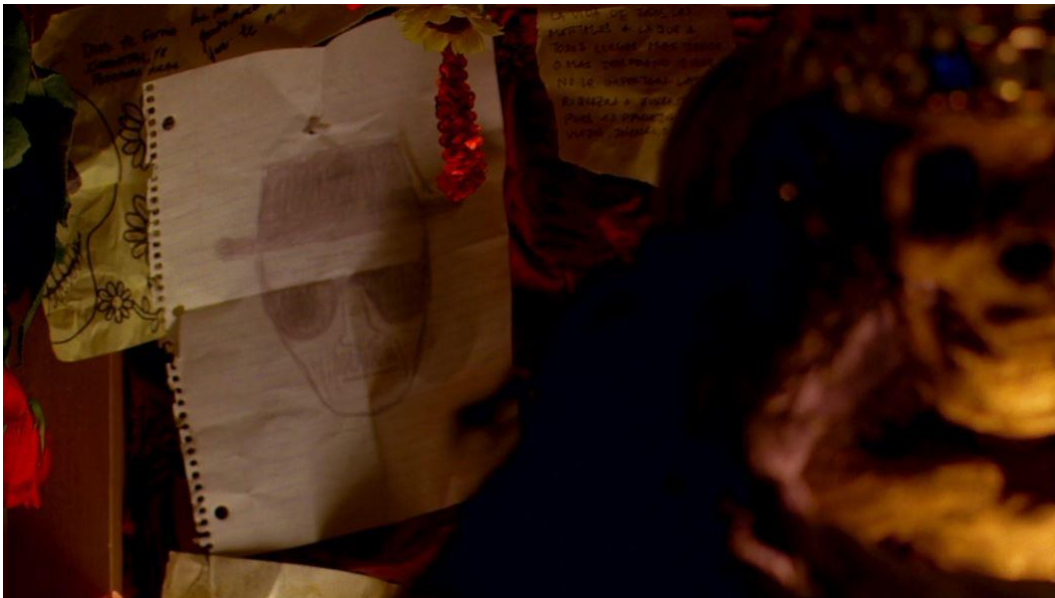


Fig. 65

The portrait of Heisenberg in the shrine.



Fig. 66

The brothers decide they need a change of clothes for their trip to America.



Fig. 67

The Salamancas' skull-toed boots draw attention.



Fig. 68

The explosive consequences of that attention.



Fig. 69

A cartel informant's head on the back of a tortoise packed with explosives.

head was placed on top of a tortoise [fig. 69], in reference to the informant's nickname) established a tone of eeriness and terror that reinforces the strangeness of the scenes with the Salamanca brothers and seems to place cartel violence on a totally separate level to the kinds of drug trade violence experienced in the series so far. The fact that the brothers seem to prefer to kill their enemies with an axe rather than a gun also suggests a familiarity and comfort with violence that no other characters share²⁸⁷.

The arrival of the brothers at Walt's house perfectly captures the unsettling and uncanny tone that often accompanies the show's most terrifying villains, with two seemingly separate worlds suddenly being merged into the same image as the brothers open the front door of the Whites' unexceptional suburban home and stand silhouetted in the doorway, one of them holding a gleaming axe by his side (fig. 70). Much as the use of shadow and perspective-distorting lenses are utilised to evoke a sense of menace when Walt is fluctuating between himself and Heisenberg within the house, here the heavy use of contrast provokes a visceral sense that the domestic sphere is being invaded by a malevolent force. The shots of the brothers moving through the house are interspersed with shots of Walt singing happily to himself in the shower, emphasising his vulnerability and lack of awareness of the danger he is in (fig. 71). As the brothers move through the house, the tracking camera focuses on the blade of the axe (fig. 72), before there is a cut and one of the brothers points out the ultrasound photo of the Whites' unborn baby on the fridge (fig. 73), with a close up of the brother's gloved finger running down the picture (fig. 74), adding to the sense that the most private areas of the family are being violated. The brothers then continue into the house until they reach Walt and Skyler's bedroom, at which point they sit down on the bed and wait patiently for Walt to finish his shower (fig. 75). Once again there is a very strong sense of uncanniness, as the familiar environment is contrasted against two figures for whom every aspect of their appearance seems to clash with the cosy,

²⁸⁷ Tuco's outbursts of violence might seem superficially similar, but the Salamanca brothers are far more calm and controlled in their use of violence, whereas the meth-fuelled Tuco is erratic and unstable.

battered domesticity of the room. As the anticipation of violence builds, one of the brothers reaches inside his jacket and removes a cell phone (fig. 76), which he opens to read a one-word text message that reads ‘POLLOS’, which he then shows to his brother. Moments later, when Walt opens the bathroom door, it is to find an empty bedroom and the brothers nowhere to be found (fig 77).

The scenes that feature the brothers are highly effective on the level of mood and tone, employing imagery and music that is meant to be disquieting and uncomfortable for the viewer to experience. The fact that they only become explicitly violent once they have crossed the border into America gives them the sense of an invading force, which is only intensified by their arrival in Walt’s home – somewhere that is supposed to be kept completely separate from the dangerous and violent world of drugs. The membrane between Walt’s business persona as a drug dealer and his identity as a father and husband is shown, despite Walter’s intentions, to be completely permeable, just as the border between the US and Mexico is. Consequently the mood created is one of invasion and violation.

There is much in this scene that could be viewed as consciously engaging with the problematic depictions of Mexican cartel violence discussed at the start of this section, at least metaphorically. Everything about the way the scenes involving the brothers are composed makes them appear strange, unknowable and malevolent – their visit to the shrine, their choice of weaponry, their muteness, their near-identical appearance, their willingness to kill a dozen people without blinking. Especially in the first episode, there is no explanation of who they are or why they are so intent on killing Walt, perfectly embodying the idea of cartel violence as unmotivated and exceptional. Yet this impression is not wholly embraced because explanations for their actions are occasionally provided (the identifying skull boot tip, for example) that prevent this impression from becoming complete. Much like the examples in the following



Fig. 70

The Salamanca brothers on the threshold of the White home.

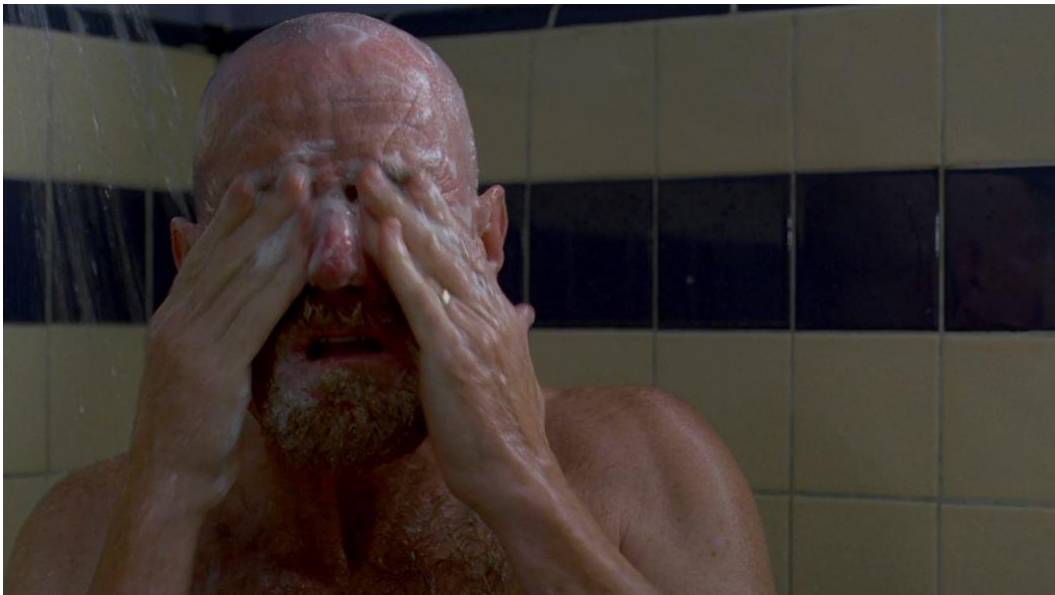


Fig. 71

Walt sings in the shower, unaware of his vulnerability.



Fig. 72

The camera follows the axe through the house.



Fig. 73

The brothers notice something on the White fridge...



Fig. 74

...which turns out to be an ultrasound picture of the unborn baby, Holly.



Fig. 75

The brothers wait patiently for Walt to finish his shower.



Fig. 76

The text from Gus makes them abandon their mission.



Fig. 77

The long hallway makes the unsuspecting Walt seem more vulnerable and alone.



Fig. 78

Gus picks up the box cutter. Walt is concerned.



Fig. 79

The camera focuses on the blade. Walt remains concerned.



Fig. 80

Gus stands over Walt with the box cutter. Walt is very concerned.



Fig. 81

Gus unexpectedly cuts Victor's throat.

section, these scenes are constructed in such a way that they create a powerful sense of near-supernatural menace while also ensuring that the actions depicted can be understood logically.

While not immediately comprehensible, what becomes increasingly clear is that it is Walt's previous actions that have introduced new levels of danger and volatility into the storyworld, in keeping with the series' focus on the way that every action causes a new and potentially disastrous reaction. From this perspective the invasion of Walt's house by the brothers could be viewed as a metaphor for the issue at the heart of the Mexican drug war. The brothers might seem monstrous and unfathomable, but they are actually motivated by the actions of Americans (Walt and Hank) who are blissfully unaware of their part in the proceedings. Under this formulation, the uncanniness and uneasiness of the brothers' invasion of the Albuquerque suburbs is not just about Walt and his past actions, but also about America and the fear that one day the violence produced by the American drug market will spill over the Mexican border and invade the peaceful domesticity of American life.

The problem with this interpretation is that so much of the argument relies on information that does not feature in the series itself, but comes from a wider awareness of the conditions and forces at play in the global drug trade. For well-informed viewers interested in assessing how these issues play out in *Breaking Bad*, such a reading might well seem convincing and accurate, but there is precious little in the series itself that would seem to encourage such a reading. The fact that *Breaking Bad* remains closely aligned with Walt's subjectivity throughout means that the kind of broad overview necessary to fully account for the chains of cause and effect influencing the Mexican drug war are largely absent. Why the Mexican drug cartels are so powerful and vicious is simply left unexamined. The specific personal motivation for the brothers' pursuit of Walt argues against a more general and expansive interpretation, particularly since the narrative construction of *Breaking Bad* consistently privileges personal motivation over societal influences. Moreover, this is only one of several occasions when the scope of the

story is expanded to accommodate a more comprehensive account of the global drug trade, only for the focus to swiftly shift back to the central characters. In the fifth season the introduction of the Czech Republic as an extra market for Walt's blue meth could be viewed as a starting point for analysing the globalised nature of the drug trade, providing context for the main storyline. Instead, the Czech Republic plot line becomes just another variable that can help drive the plot and throw up potential problems that Walt and Jesse must overcome. While *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Wire* expand the scope of their storyworlds in order to highlight or develop a thematic concern, with *Breaking Bad* the expansion is always in service of character, frustrating attempts at more comprehensive readings. Yet this unwillingness to assert a particular perspective is also fundamental to the way the series creates tension and suspense, since the lack of wider context makes it harder to anticipate the behaviour of Walt's adversaries, and how he can overcome them. The following section demonstrates how the sense of ambiguity that the series maintains is not merely due to the lack of a wider context, but is actually fundamental to the construction of the series and the experience of watching it.

Season 4: Gus the *Terminator*

This section focuses on the way the character of Gus is depicted throughout the fourth season, when his relationship with Walt has completely deteriorated and Walt spends much of the season in a frenzied panic, certain that Gus is about to kill him as soon as the opportunity presents itself. What is of particular importance here is the way in which the representation of Gus is filtered through the fear and uncertainty felt by Walt and Jesse, and how this builds to possibly the most pivotal moment in the entire narrative – Gus' death. This death only occurs because Walt manages to execute a plan that involves poisoning the son of Jesse's girlfriend, convincing Jesse that Gus is responsible and then convincing an old enemy of Gus' to set off a suicide bomb in a retirement home. In the scene outlined below (s04e09), the series' presents a

version of Gus that on first viewing seems unfathomably powerful and near-supernatural, but on repeat viewings is revealed to be the product of a fierce intelligence and keen perception. This initially encourages an allegiance and solidarity with Walt in his desperate battle against a seemingly unstoppable monster, but when rewatched, reveals that Walt is the real menace, and that Gus' death may not really be cause for celebration at all.

It is obviously true that any narrative is going to be experienced differently on a first encounter than it is on subsequent ones, since the urgency and momentum of the plot becomes less immediate, allowing other facets of the text to be afforded greater attention. Arguably these differences are more pronounced with fully-serialised immense television series like the case studies; since the story is so extended that the audience must be kept wanting to know what happens so that they come back week after week (or continue with the next episode).

Rewatching knowing how the story ends gives the audience the benefit of hindsight, while also providing some distance between the audience and the travails of the central characters. This is clearly not an experience that is exclusive to *Breaking Bad*; for instance, it is only really on repeat viewings that the flaws in Stringer Bell's ambitions for the drug trade can really be perceived, helped at least partly by the knowledge of his and Avon's betrayals of one another and his eventual demise. What makes rewatching *Breaking Bad* particularly rewarding is that the series initially appears constructed to encourage allegiance between Walt and the audience which grows ever more complicit and difficult as his actions become more heinous. When the series is rewatched, the viewer already fully grasps the swathe of destruction that Walt will leave in his wake, under the increasingly flimsy justification that he is doing terrible things for the greater good of his family. While it is obviously still possible for the rewatching viewer to maintain their allegiance to Walt and his ambitions, there is also a strong chance that awareness of the completed narrative will fundamentally alter the experience of viewing the series, generating greater sympathy for supporting characters (particularly Jesse and Skyler) who have

to deal with the pain and suffering that Walt's actions produce. It becomes harder to cheer for the hero when you know that he is actually the villain.

As discussed in the section on the doppelganger imagery, one of the ways that the show encourages audience allegiance with Walt and his indomitable alter-ego is by showing him triumphing over superficially loathsome foes. Both the disablist bully and the misogynistic KEN WINS are caricatures of anti-social bigotry designed to push the buttons of the audience and provide them with an enjoyable cathartic release when Walt/Heisenberg dispenses rough justice to them for their trespasses. Even when the opponents become more dangerous and Walt becomes more ruthless, the decisiveness and nerve displayed in the Heisenberg moments is still thrilling, particularly since they are spaced out enough to create audience anticipation. However, after the gentle and likable Gale (David Costabile) has been added to the list of people who have died or suffered to spare Walt and Jesse's necks, it arguably becomes much harder to maintain allegiance with Walt and feel like he is worthy of support in his ongoing endeavours. While Gale's murder is effective in forcing Gus to keep Walt and Jesse alive, it also marks the point where any impression that Walt and Jesse have only killed people in imminent self-defence becomes untenable, pushing the protagonists into a much darker moral quagmire. However, the idea that some moral threshold has been crossed is at least somewhat undermined by re-emphasising the mortal danger Walt and Jesse are in because they have spoilt Gus' plans.

This is done by having Gus arrive at the lab where Walt and Jesse are being kept prisoner (s04e01) and proceed to silently and methodically remove his clothes, put on waterproofs, pick up the box cutter featured in the episode's cold open, and make his way over to Walt and Jesse while Walt blusters impotently about all the reasons Gus shouldn't kill them. There is a shot composed so that the blade stands out prominently as the camera focuses first on Walt (fig. 78), then on the blade (fig. 79), then back to Walt, creating a clear association meant to suggest that the blade is intended for Walt. As Gus moves over to Walt, there is a low angled shot where the

blade is once more prominently featured, out of focus, in the foreground, while the stammering, terrified Walt is kept in focus (fig. 80) – again setting up the expectation that Gus is about to use the box cutter on him. Moving round to stand in front of Walt and Jesse, Gus listens to Walt's desperate attempts to stay his hand, before abruptly grabbing his henchman Victor (Jeremiah Bitsui) by the head and slicing his throat with the box cutter (fig. 81). Blood cascades onto Walt and Jesse as Gus holds Victor steady and slowly allows him to bleed out, all while maintaining eye contact with his two prisoners (fig. 82). He then proceeds to wash his face and hands, remove his waterproofs, put on his shirt, jacket and shoes and then ascend the staircase to the lab's exit, before pausing and uttering his only dialogue in the scene; "well, get back to work".

The explicitness of the violence in this scene is designed for maximum impact on the viewer, mirroring its purpose within the diegesis. While the reasoning behind the murder is ambiguous, the staging of it is clearly meant to strike fear into the hearts of Walt and Jesse, which it unquestionably does in the case of Walt, who becomes convinced that Gus is going to kill him at any moment. This leads him in the next episode (s04e02), to foolishly attempt to recruit Mike (Jonathan Banks) to the cause of killing Gus. In doing so he asks a question which appears to be just about Gus' motives, but is in fact the key to understanding what the series is doing to the audience, not just in this scene, but throughout:

Walt: If it happened to Victor it could happen to you. *And what the hell was that*

anyway? A message? He cuts a man's throat just to send a message? (emphasis added)

Gus has hitherto been portrayed as a man of cold calculation and precise manipulation always several steps ahead of the other characters and unfailingly in control of his emotions. This being the case, Walt's question is clearly the correct one to ask. If Gus killed Victor just to send a message to Walt (a notion which persists into the fifth season) this makes him a very different kind of villain to that which either Walt or the audience has previously experienced. He is either a psychopathic madman willing to sacrifice a trusted and valuable employee just to terrify Walt,

or a newer version of Tuco, brutally murdering his employee for stepping out of line and undermining his authority by starting the meth cook without authorisation. Either interpretation is likely to radically alter how Gus is perceived by the audience, and keep them closely allied with Walt in the face of this new level of danger. The morally bankrupt action of killing Gale in the previous season suddenly takes a backseat to the far more immediate and gory reality in which Walt finds himself.

Although the shock and horror of Victor's execution is likely to prompt the audience to share Walt's conviction that Gus really is unstable, it is entirely possible to understand his actions in a way that considerably undermines this conclusion. When Victor arrives in the lab with Jesse and informs Mike what has happened to Gale, they have the following conversation which sheds some light on Gus' possible motives;

Mike: Alright, you do a sweep?

Victor: Couldn't, people there.

Mike: People? He get himself seen by these people? (Victor shakes his head) What about you? What about you?

Victor: Yeah, so what? Just another Looky-Lou.

This brief conversation provides an alternative interpretation of Victor's murder – scaring Walt and Jesse was undoubtedly part of the plan, but the primary motive for killing Victor is that he was seen at Gale's apartment, which provides a potent avenue of investigation for the police. While the audience does not see Mike's phone call to Gus, it seems highly probable that Mike would have reported Victor's error, and that Gus had made up his mind to kill Victor long before he entered the lab. The murder (and subsequent dissolution of Victor's body in acid) is intended to ensure that there are no connections that could link Gale with Gus' meth operation. This is successful, as although the discovery of Gale's notebook and the Los Pollos Hermanos

napkin means that Gus is questioned by the DEA, the Victor trail goes cold. The violence of the murder notwithstanding, a close reading of these scenes reveals that the elimination of Victor is not necessarily the absurd over-reaction of a psychopath, but rather is an act of caution and practicality entirely in keeping with the character established in the previous seasons. Obviously it is also designed to be horrifying, but this is essentially Gus making the best out of a bad situation – since Victor has to die anyway, he might as well terrify his errant employees with the hope that doing so will make them easier to control.

This sets up a pattern that will be repeated across the rest of the season, where Gus' actions initially appear terrifyingly unfathomable, but only because the audience is so closely aligned with Walt's subjectivity that the logical explanation is obscured. Cumulatively these moments construct Gus as variation on a horror-movie villain with supernatural abilities that make him seem impossible to defeat or outmanoeuvre. Some examples are easy to understand, as when Walt goes to Gus' house with his newly acquired gun (s04e02), intent on killing him, until he receives a phone call from Gus instructing him to go home. The final shot of the scene is an extreme bird's eye view shot that has Walt stranded in the middle of the road, just a tiny, stranded figure looking around to try and perceive where he is being observed from (fig. 83). The bird's eye view shot not only carries a strong sense of Walt's isolation and vulnerability but it also invites a feeling of omniscience in a similar way to how Gus was depicted in the third season – someone so well connected, so aware of what is going on that he could call off two vengeful cartel hitmen with a one-word text. While it is hardly surprising that a multimillionaire drug kingpin would have either watchmen or sophisticated electronic surveillance around his home, the fact that this is not confirmed or identified means that the use of the bird's eye view shot encourages a sense that Gus is all-seeing and that Walt does not have the resources to realistically challenge him. This impression is essentially confirmed in a later episode, when Walt goes to Jesse to urge him to insist on a meeting with Gus so he can use the ricin on him (s04e08). In response to Jesse's angry suggestion that if Walt wants to poison Gus so badly he

should do it himself, Walt replies “he can see me coming like he’s some kind of...”, before trailing off. While Walt doesn’t put a name to the kind of entity Gus seems like to him, the sense that Walt perceives Gus as something other or more than human is palpable.

Gus' aura of superhuman ability is made arrestingly vivid in the following episode (s04e09), when the cartel's emissary to Gus opens fire with a sniper rifle on Jesse, Mike and various other henchmen. The attack comes with no warning and the composition of the scene is designed so that the audience's experience is closely aligned with Jesse's. The action goes into slow motion as Jesse witnesses the man in front of him take a bullet to the head and fall to the ground (fig. 84), while he stands frozen as the crack and boom of gunfire reverberates on the soundtrack, but with a muted quality to the sound that seems to express Jesse's state of detached immobility (fig. 85). In the period between the gunfire starting and Mike dragging him to safety, the audience is given access to Jesse's POV as he stares at the dead body in front of him (fig. 86), then looks straight ahead at the direction the bullets are coming from (fig. 87), further emphasising how closely aligned the scene is with Jesse's perception. As Mike and Jesse take cover, Gus walks out into the open and begins marching purposefully straight towards the oncoming sniper fire, ignoring Mike's instruction to get down (fig. 88). The appearance of Gus prompts a change in the music (which only begins once Mike bundles Jesse to safety), switching from rapid metallic percussion to a low, distorted bass note along with a strange mechanical screeching sound that follows the sound and sight of another bullet exploding in the ground in front of Gus (fig. 89). The harshness of the gunfire and accompanying non-diegetic metallic screech is extremely jarring, particularly with the low, growling distortion throbbing beneath it, creating a tone of strangeness and incomprehension that perfectly complements the action. While bullets fly around him, Gus continues to stride unflinchingly onwards until he stops in the middle of open ground and opens his arms (fig. 90), challenging the sniper to take his shot and kill him. There is a cut to a shot in which the crosshairs of the rifle's telescopic sight are trained directly on Gus' head smiles slightly, and leaves, as all non-diegetic sound swiftly disappears. Experienced in



Fig. 82

Gus stares down Walt and Jesse while Victor bleeds out.



Fig. 83

Bird's eye view shot of Walt, unable to perceive where Gus is observing him from.



Fig. 84

The cartel sniper begins his assault on Gus' henchmen.



Fig. 85

Jesse's reaction to the gunfire (or lack of it).



Fig. 86

The dead henchman from Jesse's point of view.



Fig. 87

The cartel sniper from Jesse's point of view.



Fig. 88

Gus walks into oncoming sniper fire.



Fig. 89

Bullets hit the ground in front of Gus. He keeps walking.



Fig. 90

Gus challenges the cartel sniper to kill him.

the moment, this scene seems to break entirely with any sense of reality that the series possesses, as the failure of the gunman to hit Gus makes him seem omnipotent, as if he is repelling the bullets by force of will. The composition of the sequence of shots as he strides towards the gunman only serve to emphasise Gus' obvious vulnerability, which in turn heightens the incomprehension experienced by a first-time viewer unable to understand why not a single bullet touches him.

It is only once Jesse and Mike have disposed of the dead henchman's body that a solution is provided for Jesse and the audience;

Jesse: But seriously, what was the deal with Gus?

Mike: The deal?

Jesse: That *Terminator* shit? Walking right into the bullets? What the hell was he doing?

Mike: The cartel needs Gus, his distribution network. They're not looking to kill him.

Here, as with all of the other occasions when Gus seems to possess supernatural powers, there is an explanation that demonstrates Gus' extraordinary ability to immediately get the measure of a situation and then act on the conclusions he draws without hesitation or fear. Knowing how and why Gus is able to walk into oncoming sniper fire does not make the feat unremarkable, but it does place it back within the sphere of human capabilities, rather than making him seem, as Jesse aptly puts it, like he is a character from a science-fiction movie. While this sequence is not seen by Walt, it is able to be so disorienting and shocking because the audience has been conditioned by the examples mentioned above to align themselves with Walt's perception of Gus as possessing powers seemingly outside the range of normal humans. This is still arguably the case (there is, after all, a substantial difference between knowing that someone won't shoot you and actually daring them to shoot you), but this explanation ensures that it is grounded in an understandable reality. This is because it is Jesse who witnesses this scene, and while Jesse may

still want Gus dead he is under none of the terrified paranoid delusions that Walt is suffering from. This is a crucial scene because it is an overt demonstration that regardless of how Gus' actions appear in the moment, there is always a logical solution to them, whether or not that solution is made apparent within the diegesis. Unlike the incidents experienced by Walt, on this occasion it is Jesse's subjectivity that the audience is aligned with, and while both Jesse and the viewer are flummoxed by the events as they take place, the explanation provided by Mike demystifies Gus and makes him human again. Walt is never privy to the thought processes that drive Gus' more notable actions, so in his mind Gus becomes ever more monstrous and undefeatable – something that is crucial for establishing the terror that drives Walt's grotesque but successful plan to poison Brock (Ian Posada) and enlist Jesse as an ally again.

Yet even though the first-time viewer has had this moment of Gus' invulnerability demystified, the low-key way in which this occurs means that the experience of seeing Gus walk into sniper fire is likely to be far more arresting than the explanation of that behaviour. The credulity of the audience is essential for the powerful effect created by the final moments of the penultimate episode (s04e12) when Jesse's refusal to continue the cook succeeds in luring Gus to the hospital, and providing time for Walt to affix a bomb to Gus' car. After allowing Jesse to abandon the cook and stay at the hospital, Gus returns to the car park with his henchmen in tow, as Walt sits waiting in eager anticipation on the roof of a nearby building. As Gus approaches his car he suddenly stops and stands still, as if sensing that something is wrong, before abruptly striding to the edge of the building and staring out towards where Walt is hiding. Slowly Gus begins to scan the buildings opposite him, as if he knows that Walt is out there and he is about to spot him (fig. 92). As with the '*Terminator*' sequence, Gus' behaviour seems superhuman at this moment, and the audience shares Walt's utter bewilderment. The soundtrack is once more filled with metallic percussive noises and an increasingly shrill distortion that abruptly disappears as Gus turns from the railing and walks briskly away from the car.

As with the other examples, upon reflection or repeat viewing this sequence can be understood as another impressive feat of logical deduction by Gus that only has the appearance of, as Walt puts it, “sixth sense”. Since Gus knows that he did not poison Brock, it stands to reason that he would be pondering who did and for what reason, and since Walt has already gone rogue it is hardly surprising that Gus would be considering the possibility it was him. As he comes upon his unguarded car, it presumably occurs to him that if Walt has poisoned Brock and convinced Jesse that Gus was responsible, that would mean they are working together and that Gus’ car may have become compromised. If that is the case, it would stand to reason that Walt would be within eyesight of the car so that he could blow it up at the right moment, so if he is watching that should mean he himself is within Gus’ field of vision, prompting the scan of the rooftops and abandonment of the car. Even if Gus was wrong about any of these assumptions, the potential threat is substantial and the abandonment of the car is, for him, a trifling inconvenience, so even if the probability that the car is rigged with a bomb is small, it is still worth being cautious rather than risking his life. For the audience none of this is really perceivable in the moment (especially since the viewer is convinced that Gus did indeed poison Brock) making the acuity of Gus’ perception, especially scanning the rooftops, so unfathomable as to be supernatural.

The final payoff of this depiction of Gus comes in his final scene (s04e13), when he has been lured to Tio Salamanca’s (Mark Margolis) retirement home because he believes that Tio has been collaborating with the DEA, when actually he is in league with Walt. When Tio detonates the bomb attached to his wheelchair, the action cuts to outside of Tio’s room as a huge explosion bursts out of the doorway (fig. 93). The shot continues to hold for several seconds before Gus suddenly emerges from the room looking a little shell-shocked but otherwise intact (fig. 94). This is one final moment where the series creators playfully toy with the viewer’s credulity, bolstered by the various examples of Gus’ seemingly superhuman abilities, daring the audience to believe that Gus is essentially indestructible. Then the camera begins to track round

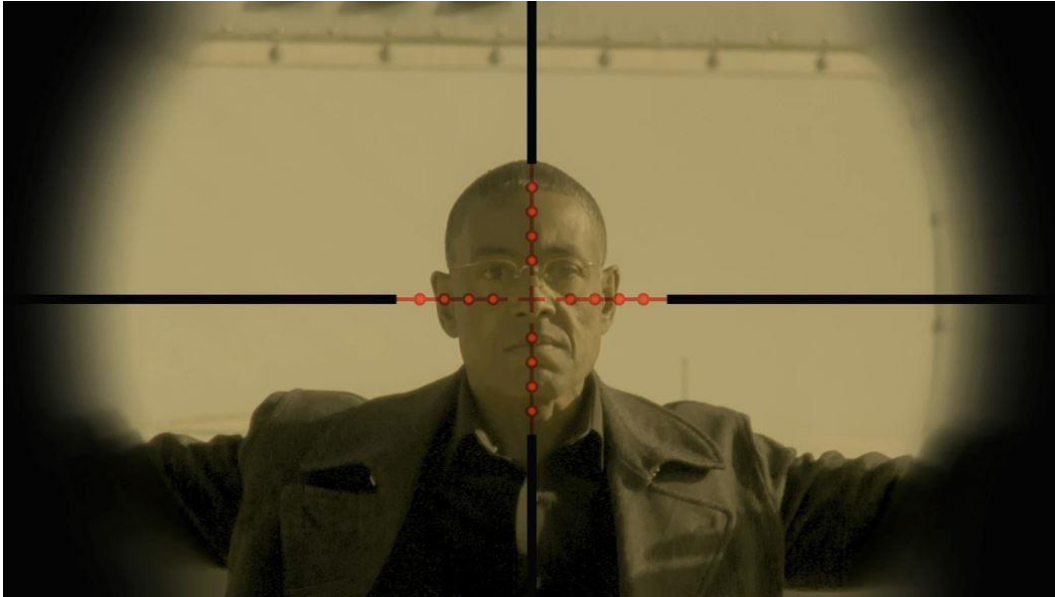


Fig. 91

The cartel sniper's point of view through the telescopic sight.

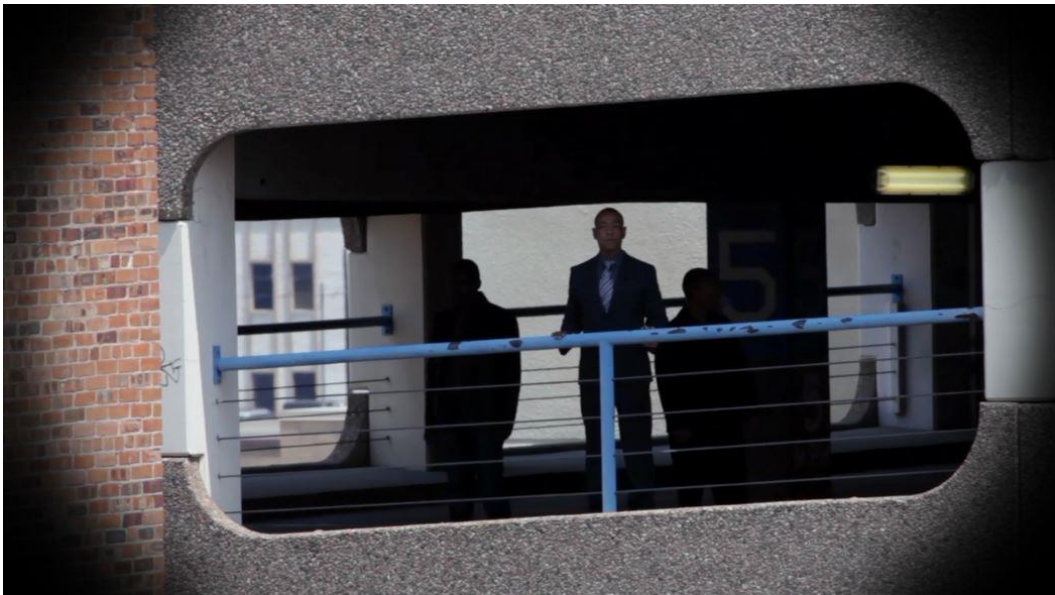


Fig. 92

Walt's point of view as Gus looks out at the rooftops, trying to find him.



Fig. 93

Tio Salamanca's suicide bomb goes off.



Fig. 94

Gus steps out from the blast zone, apparently unharmed.



Fig. 95

The nurses' reactions suggest Gus might not be unharmed.



Fig. 96

Gus is definitely not unharmed.

from the side of Gus (fig. 95) until it is directly in front of him, revealing that the entire right side of his face has been blown away (fig. 96), before he finally lets go of his tie and collapses, dead. Here there is no explanation for how an explosion that completely disintegrated Tio and Tyrus (Ray Campbell) could have left Gus substantially untarnished, and in this sense the show's creators somewhat undermine the process they have employed in the examples cited above. But the purpose here is not to be absolutely true to reality; instead they are looking for an emotional response that has been carefully cultivated throughout the season – a desire for the audience to really believe that Walt's perception of Gus is accurate and he really is invincible.

This moment of total astonishment only lasts for a couple of seconds, before being replaced by the catharsis of realising that the supervillain has finally been slain and Walt has 'won'. The combination of disbelief, tension and then release means that there is a sense of inevitability in the subsequent scenes where Walt heads to the laundry to kill the rest of Gus' men, rescue Jesse, and burn the lab to the ground – Walt has already killed the boss, so his underlings pose no obstacle. There is then a contemplative moment on top of a car park between Walt and Jesse, as Jesse reveals that Brock wasn't poisoned by the ricin but by lily of the valley, and the audience realises that Gus was not responsible. For a couple of minutes the audience is left to assume that the entire thing came down to chance – Brock just happened to eat the berries and get sick at the same time that Jesse managed to lose the ricin cigarette. Then comes the final shot of the season as the camera pans and tracks across the White back yard until it moves increasingly close to one particular plant until the identifying label is visible and reveals it to be lily of the valley, and the season ends.

This reveal of the elaborateness and ruthlessness of Walt's machinations is a crucial moment in the series because it so dramatically changes the audience's perception of everything that has come before it, as well as indicating a level of callousness not previously expected of Walt. From this point on, the sense that Walt is embracing his alter-ego only increases, until the point

that he is relishing the fact that the criminal world knows his name and that he is the man who killed the great Gus Fring. With Gus dead and Jesse and Mike both participating in his plans, Walt's arrogance and sense of entitlement grow until Walter White is essentially subsumed into Heisenberg by choice, rather than having Heisenberg overwhelm Walt against his will. While Walt clearly sees himself as the inheritor of Gus' crown, Mike is always there to remind him that "just because you shot Jesse James, don't make you Jesse James". Only once Gus is dead and Walt is trying to emulate his operation does it really get brought home to the audience how extraordinary Gus' operation was and how brilliant he had to be to pull it off for decades.

Whereas Walt has grown increasingly reckless, violent, panicky and headstrong, on reflection or re-watching Gus seems like a far more preferable candidate to run a business as dangerous as producing and selling meth. In fact it becomes clear that, were it not for Walt and Jesse coming into his life, Gus would have continued to inconspicuously run the Southwest drug trade with a minimum of violence for the foreseeable future, with Gale as his cook producing extremely high quality product in relative safety and anonymity. Far from Gus being a horrifying, *Terminator*-style villain, it soon becomes clear that it is Walt who has become the real monster.

The essential ambiguities of *Breaking Bad*, both in relation to the representation of prohibition and more generally, are only exacerbated by the scenes outlined in this section, capable as they are of producing substantially different interpretations depending on the disposition and familiarity of the viewer. The argument being advanced here is that a first time viewer is likely to feel closely allied to the concerns and interests of the main characters, viewing Gus as a malevolent and unstoppable force, and consequently sympathising with the seemingly insurmountable odds that Walt is up against. Even though Walt's behaviour throughout the season grows increasingly manic, foolhardy, ugly and reckless, the spectre of the omniscient and omnipotent Gus means that these points can be overlooked or excused because the fear that grips Walt is repeatedly induced in the viewer. A first-time viewer may well see Gus as the most frightening manifestation of the horrors of the drug trade yet encountered in the series, which is

clearly how he appears to Walt. Yet the uncertainty regarding how one should interpret this perspective remains as elusive as ever – either it is proof that drug dealers are inherently monstrous people, or it proves that the conditions of the prohibited marketplace are so extreme that to be successful in it one must develop near-superhuman abilities.

Alternatively, on repeat viewings the possibility arises for a very different interpretation of Gus to be made, arguing that he is in many ways an exemplary drug dealer, and that his murder is not the triumph of David over Goliath, but rather the substitution of chaos for stability. Gus may be a menace to Walt, but overall the professionalism and consistency of his extensive drug empire can be viewed as vastly preferable to the disorder that prevails in the wake of his demise. In *The Wire* the Co-Op was shown to be an effective way of dramatically reducing the amount of drug-related violence because it provided a forum where grievances could be settled peacefully.

Instead of murderous competition between rival gangs, the Co-Op created a monopoly – something far more stable and thus far more discreet. The same principle motivates Luciano and Lansky's eventual formation of the National Crime Syndicate, where the heads of different criminal outfits could meet to settle disputes about territory, business practices and personnel.

The creators of *Breaking Bad* provide enough context that Gus' seemingly impossible or unfathomable actions are always susceptible to a logical explanation, even if the aesthetic components seem to endorse a more paranoid reaction. Consequently, it is possible to reinterpret the story of Gus and Walt in such a way that it is Gus who becomes the victim of his erratic and volatile employee. When one considers that the thing that replaces Gus Fring and his impeccable distribution network is a loose coalition between Walt, Jesse, Mike and a heavily armed gang of Neo-Nazis, the idea that things would have been much better if Gus had killed Walt begins to sound rather plausible.

However, once again the argument falters because of how open to interpretation the evidence for such a reading is, and even accepting that the series includes scenes that play very differently on

repeat viewings doesn't give much indication of how this might translate into a particular viewpoint. What it does demonstrate is that there is a level of intricacy and detail in the construction of the series that amply rewards repeat viewings, but unlike *The Wire* or *Boardwalk Empire* the critical distance provided by rewatching does not facilitate the comprehension of a wide-ranging social critique or a deconstruction of prohibition as an institution. Instead the pleasure of rewatching is to be found in the mise-en-scène, shot selection, music choices and performances, since knowledge of where the story eventually ends inescapably colours everything that has gone before.

Season 5: The Ending He Deserved?

The final season of *Breaking Bad* was split into two eight-episode chunks, the first charting Walt's rise to the top of the meth trade, and the second beginning with Hank's realisation of Heisenberg's true identity and ending with Walt's death. The moment selected for this season is the final shot of the series (s05e16). Since *Breaking Bad* has such strong centripetal narrative complexity and is intimately aligned with its central protagonist, Walt's eventual fate would seem destined to confer some authority on one or another of the various theories already presented in this chapter, including the series' outlook on prohibition. Walt's justification for his behaviour has always been the long-term financial stability of his family, so on the basic question of whether crime does or doesn't pay, knowing whether Walt ultimately achieves his goal is likely to influence the audience's overall understanding of the series.

It would be reasonable to argue that there are actually two endings to *Breaking Bad*; the finale itself, and the antepenultimate episode 'Ozymandias' (s05e14). 'Ozymandias' is the climax to which the entire series has been building. It involves the complete shattering of so many of the secrets and lies that have been sustained throughout the past five seasons, as well as the violation of Walt's absolute psychological boundary – his family. At the end of the episode,

Walt is effectively finished as both criminal and family man – his son knows the truth, the police know the truth, his family has turned against him entirely, the Neo-Nazis have stolen most of his fortune and imprisoned Jesse, and he has had to go into hiding and take on a new identity. In the penultimate episode (s05e15), Walt still has not accepted his new circumstances, and continues to try and construct a scheme that would allow him to extract revenge on the Neo-Nazis while also getting his remaining money back to his family. The episode traces the gradual erosion of these plans as Walt is rebuffed by his family and weakened by his cancer, until it appears he has truly given up hope. However, when, at the end of the episode, he watches his estranged friends Gretchen and Elliott (Adam Godley) disavow him on television, he seems to become reinvigorated and manages to escape ahead of the police closing in on him.

Both of these episodes heavily suggest that Walt is finally getting his just desserts for all the terrible things he has done across the previous five seasons, comfortably fitting within the moral universe the series creators had established from the earliest episodes. As with many gangster narratives, the gradual rise is followed by the precipitous fall, limiting the ideological disruptiveness of the gangster and emphasising that crime ultimately does not pay. Yet the actual finale significantly undermines this conclusion, even though it ends with the death of the protagonist. Instead the viewer is left with a range of possible reactions that are likely to be significantly different depending on how the overall story has been understood. Even in the show's final movement, the creators construct an ending that seems designed to produce a range of responses and frustrate attempts to assign a specific conclusion or moral to the tale.

The final scene involves a fatally wounded Walt walking through the Neo-Nazi meth lab that Jesse has been forced to work in for the past six months, running his gaze over the instruments in an almost paternal way. Upon picking up a gas mask (linking the moment back to the pilot episode) a song begins playing on the soundtrack ('Baby Blue' by Badfinger) with the lyrics fitting the tone and content of the scene remarkably well. The first line of the lyric is particularly

apt – “guess I got what I deserved” – but also expresses a certain amount of ambiguity, which only increases when Walt slumps lifeless to the ground a few moments later, as the police arrive on the scene. The question of whether or not Walt deserves the ending that the creators have provided for him is a difficult one for the audience to answer. It hinges on how the individual viewer has engaged with the series and with Walt as a character. By the final episode, Walt has murdered numerous people, manufactured thousands of pounds of a highly addictive drug, and torn apart his family. He has also murdered his enemies (the Neo-Nazis, Lydia [Laura Fraser]), apparently manipulated Gretchen and Elliott into passing on the rest of his fortune to his son, tried to bring Skyler some closure by admitting his guilt, and freed Jesse from slavery. He dies alone and without his family, but believing that they have at last been financially taken care of in a way that the police cannot interfere with. While Walt’s desires and goals shift as the seasons progress, his initial motivation for entering the drug trade was to secure the financial security of his family before he died. If the viewer accepts that Gretchen and Elliott believe Walt has hired two hitmen to kill them unless the transfer of the money to Walt Jr goes as directed, then on the most fundamental level of stated goal and eventual outcome, Walt achieves what he set out to.

Whether or not the money does make its way to Walt Jr is obviously impossible to determine (given that the series ends before Walt's plan comes to fruition), although there is nothing in the episode that indicates that Gretchen and Elliott perceive that Walt is bluffing about the hitmen. Thus Walt dies in the location he loves (the laboratory), believing that his family will ultimately be financially well-off, with all his enemies dead, and having never been arrested, tried or convicted for any of the myriad crimes he has committed. Of course, Hank is dead, his wife and son hate him, he will be forever known as a murderous drug lord, and he has destroyed many, many lives. Yet, for someone who has constantly justified his actions by focusing unerringly on the ends rather than the means, it seems reasonable to assume that in Walt’s head the gains ultimately outweigh the losses, and thus he dies with a sense of serenity and contentment not shared by any other character. While it would clearly be open to the viewer to reach the

conclusion that the losses absolutely outweigh the gains, to do so one would have to assemble different criteria for success than that used by Walt. The viewer is likely to come to the conclusion that the chance to make enough money for Walt Jr. (which it is not even certain he receives) cannot possibly be worth Walt's personal degradation and the horrors that he perpetrated on others. Nevertheless, it is hard to shake the impression that, at least in Walt's head, he dies victorious.

As with so much in *Breaking Bad*, the ending leaves the audience with a number of different interpretations that all seem plausible but none of which feels definitive. To those for whom the major appeal of the show has been Walt's transformation into Heisenberg and the cathartic enjoyment of his rise to power, then the final episode feels like a satisfactory payoff, where Walt gets to die content and victorious. For those viewers repulsed by the harm Walt has caused and were waiting to see him get his comeuppance, the ending is likely to feel unsatisfactory because Walt gets to die on his own terms with his goals at least partially achieved. One of Walt's greatest flaws from the very beginning of the series is that he could not escape the notion that what really mattered once he received his cancer prognosis was securing the financial security of his family. Particularly on a repeat viewing, it is obvious that Walt's single-minded pursuit of money is causing considerable harm to his family and distancing him from them just at the point where they need to be close to him the most.

To mention just one example, when Walt has retired from the meth business at the beginning of the third season, Gus makes a number of pitches aimed at getting Walt back to cooking so that he can get the newly-created super-lab up and running. As part of this, Gus takes Walt to see the lab with all its beautiful new equipment with the hope that it will seduce Walt and get him to return (s03e05), prompting the following exchange;

Walt: Sorry, the answer is still no. I have made a series of very bad decisions and I cannot make another one.

Gus: Why did you make these decisions?

Walt: For the good of my family.

Gus: Then they weren't bad decisions. What does a man do, Walter? A man provides for his family.

Walt: This cost me my family.

Gus: When you have children, you always have family. They will always be your priority, your responsibility. And a man, a man provides. And he does it even when he's not appreciated, or respected, or even loved. He simply bears up and he does it. Because he's a man.

Compared with many of the significant moments in *Breaking Bad* this one is very low key and ends before a definitive conclusion is reached, with the audience relying on Cranston's performance to glean exactly how Walt is affected by Gus' argument. Even more than his intellectual vanity or love of chemistry, Gus perceives that Walt's greatest weakness is his belief that he is a failure as a man if he leaves his family financially destitute after his death, and Walt's capitulation following this scene makes it clear that this is correct. Even though he has enough experience to know he should keep far away from the drug trade, Walt still returns because he cannot overcome his destructive view of how he obligated to behave as a father, husband, and man.

Ultimately Walt sacrifices his family for the sake of his family – the fact that Walt has to contrive such an elaborate plan for getting his money to Walt Jr is ample demonstration that they cared far less about money than he did, and that they value some things more highly. Essentially the Gretchen and Elliott plan is as much about Walt finding a way to deceive his family into accepting his misbegotten gains than it is about finding a way to evade law enforcement agencies that would confiscate the money. There is something pathetic in the fact

that despite all the pain and misery he has generated, Walt never really wavers from his belief that money will eventually heal all wounds. This is heavily emphasised at the end of the penultimate episode of the series when Walt calls Walt Jr at school to tell him that he is sending a box of money to Walt Jr's friend Lewis so that the police won't intercept it. Even after everything that has happened, Walt is almost incapable of approaching the conversation from anything other than a financial perspective – when he begins crying it is because “I wanted to give you so much more, but this is all I could do”, not because of any of the other awful things he has done. When Walt Jr starts furiously denouncing him and refusing the money, Walt desperately tries to interject, saying “You need this money, your mother needs this money, it can't all be for nothing, please!”. This moment seems to be the end of the line for Walt – having made everything about the money, Walt Jr's absolute rejection of it leaves him with nothing left to sustain him, and he indicates his hopelessness by picking up the phone to call the DEA and give himself up. It is only once he sees Gretchen and Elliott denouncing him on television that he finds the motivation to flee the bar just ahead of the police, leaving him to return to Albuquerque with one final plan that will ensure his family takes his money, whether they want it or not.

Conclusion

Unlike *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Wire*, the strength of *Breaking Bad* exists in the interactions of a limited number of extensively elaborated characters, rather than the expansive scale of history or society. Walt's death is not the consequence of larger social or political forces that have dragged him into their undertow, as with Nucky, but instead is about his very personal initial reaction to his cancer diagnosis, and the on-going consequences arising from it. His death is not a repudiation of his approach to the drug trade, as with Stringer, or an analogy intended to underline some essential truth about the nature of prohibition as a system. *Breaking Bad* differs

significantly in its storytelling approach by consistently disavowing or eliding a broader political or historical context in favour of a dense, concentrated account of individual psychology that pervades all facets of the programme's narrative and aesthetic construction.

Each of the moments selected for analysis in the section above emphasises a particular facet of this project, whether it be a difference in tone, *mise-en-scène*, characterisation or camerawork. The first season established the terrain the series was to cover, emphasising how swiftly things can go wrong once you enter into a life of criminality, regardless of good intentions. The early episodes also underlined the moral dimension to Walt and Jesse's early experiences rather than attempting to contextualise or mitigate their behaviour by emphasising the systemic forces at work within the prohibited marketplace. The doppelgänger motif in season two reaffirms the tight focus on Walt and his psychological response to the necessity of modifying his personality and behaviour in order to survive and advance in his new industry. The belief that it is possible to separate the two worlds that are represented by the appearance of the doppelgänger is shown to be a fantasy by the arrival of the Salamanca twins at his doorstep – an event that acknowledges a wider geopolitical context for the series, without ever fully engaging with it. While this continues into the rest of the series, the fourth season demonstrates why analysing questions of representation can be frustrating, as the composition of the entire series is so closely aligned with Walt's experience that it is often not possible to achieve critical distance from the story, even if one wants to. Yet even with the benefit of hindsight and multiple viewings, the range of possible interpretations, particularly of the series finale, are still so profigate that no single one stands out against the rest.

What remains consistent throughout all these examples is the specificity of Walter White as a character, and how so many of the decisions he makes throughout the series are driven by events in his past or the flaws in his personality. While outside influences constantly intrude on Walt's plans, his responses are typically bound up in the quirks of his psychology, rather than the

unavoidable conditions created by prohibition. Although in many cases these conditions can be seen as a significant factor, the series consistently eschews them in favour of character psychology. Walt never managed to shake the notion that for his family the most devastating consequence of his death would be financial, which ultimately blinded him to the harm he was causing to the world in general and his family in particular. While Walt had moments where he could appreciate that he had followed the wrong path under the wrong pretences, he was never able to shake his psychological wiring regarding his position as father, husband and provider. Although the conditions of the drug trade clearly exacerbated and hastened his personality shift, there is ultimately no real suggestion that Walt is standing in for a particular group or type, since so much of what he does is presented as the result of his specific neuroses and personal history. His death doesn't change anything significant about the series, since almost everything he does is simply the elimination of an earlier problem or is driven by the same foolhardy beliefs that have plagued him from the very first episode. That *Breaking Bad* ultimately frustrates attempts to construct a single comprehensive account of prohibition is not a failure, but a consequence of how successfully they incorporate ambiguity and uncertainty into the aesthetic, narrative and thematic fabric of the series.

CONCLUSION

This thesis has brought together three examples of prestige television on the basis of their status as fully-serialised narratives, each of which represents a distinct form of serialised narrative complexity as defined by Jason Mittell, and each of which involve a sustained representation of prohibition as a setting and theme. While this research has placed particular emphasis on questions relating to the narrative and character construction in each series, this has been augmented by frequent analyses of the aesthetic strategies through which these issues are represented, with particular emphasis on mise-en-scène, camerawork, editing and music, along with series-specific issues relating to generic affiliation, cold opens, re-watching and textual moments. This conclusion is divided into three broad sections, each devoted to addressing specific aspects of the research questions and how they have been addressed within the analysis. While each part of the conclusion is primarily focused on one aspect of the research, they are not rigidly segregated, and the need to compare different representational issues results in some overlap between sections. The first section considers how the aesthetic strategies of each series influenced its representation of prohibition, with particular emphasis on the style of each series. The second section considers how the narrative organisation of each series impacted the representation of prohibition, with particular emphasis on the importance of character and the structure of sympathy. The final section reflects on the usefulness of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum to the analysis of representation in general, and offers some conclusions regarding the refinement and development of the approach for future scholarship.

Representation and Aesthetic Approach

Despite the marked differences in style between each series, one of the more surprising aspects of the representational analysis undertaken in this research is how much overlap existed in the conclusions that each series reaches regarding the nature of prohibition. While not quite as lacking in stylistic flourishes as some scholars have sought to portray it, *The Wire* is generally consistent in the way its cultivated impression of realism is utilised throughout the series, which has clearly been a key factor in its utilisation as a pedagogic tool far beyond television studies. As the discussion of the body of scholarship surrounding the series demonstrated, both academics and the creators of the series have been invested in the idea that the series offers a pseudo-journalistic account of the complex interplay between various Baltimore institutions, and the range of issues that restrict or resist their successful functioning. The use of non-actors, location shooting, exclusively diegetic music, colloquial dialogue and unobtrusive cinematography and editing allows for the representation of prohibition as a broad-scale system to be emphasised and foregrounded.

This is particularly evident in the Hamsterdam storyline, where the methodical, gradual development of the initiative keeps the fundamentally hypothetical and utopian project grounded within the expectations established in previous seasons. By aligning the audience with characters who are both well-intentioned and ultimately unsuccessful, the series represents prohibition as a system that is fundamentally flawed and destined to revert back to the status quo, so deeply entrenched are the vested interests of those capable of achieving widespread change. Unlike the other case studies, *The Wire* does not significantly deviate from the type of character change outlined by Pearson and Mittell, and instead it positions characters in relation to the institutions they inhabit. Colvin and Carver are both constructed as sympathetic characters lacking any overt ideological perspectives on the desirability of prohibition, with the focus instead being on their pragmatism and willingness to try something different in the face of

futility (arguably making them avatars for the audience that has already witnessed the harm produced by prohibition in the first two seasons). The style of the series facilitates these rhetorical devices by failing to differentiate between the ‘what if?’ proposition of *Hamsterdam* and the more established representational issues that permeate the series as a whole.

The consistency of the series’ aesthetic approach also facilitates the development of more precise and specific aspects of how prohibition is characterised and represented. In the same way that the ground-laying that takes place in the first two seasons facilitates the establishment of *Hamsterdam* as a plausible account of decriminalization, so it also allows for individual characters to act as focal points for particular areas of representation. Once again, despite the fully-serialised narrative, what is most notable about the representation of the series’ three main drug dealers is how unyielding and static they remain across multiple seasons, to the point where this inflexibility becomes part of the commentary being offered regarding the fundamental nature of prohibition as a system. The pairing of Stringer Bell with Major Colvin acknowledges the impossibility of meaningful reform, regardless of whether the motivation behind it is beneficent (Colvin) or selfish (Stringer). The failure of Stringer’s plan for capitalism to overcome drug trade violence is made even more overt by the rise to dominance of Marlo, as his success becomes increasingly defined by his willingness (one might even say eagerness) to resort to violence not as a last, regrettable option, but as the solution to practically any problem that might arise. The success of this approach is observable not only in Marlo’s concentration of power and wealth, but also in the extreme lengths that McNulty and Freamon are driven to in their compulsion to bring him to justice (and the fact that this ultimately does not come to pass). By depicting Marlo as a character primarily defined by his relationship to violence, *The Wire* offers a representation of prohibition as a system in which violence is not an unfortunate by-product or regrettable anomaly, but as a fundamental, inescapable consequence of the conditions that are produced when drugs are prohibited and their providers are subjected to intense and punitive surveillance. The series offers the possibility of other conclusions, before ultimately

showing that these are naïve or myopic, and that prohibition is a system that cannot help but produce harmful consequences, many of which extend far beyond the putative domain of cops and gangsters.

Unlike *The Wire*, where the style of the series downplays any impression that it is a constructed version of a fictional reality, *Boardwalk Empire*'s aesthetic construction is fundamentally connected to its broader representational strategies, particularly in relation to the topic of prohibition. Central to both the aesthetic and representational strategies of the series is the way it engages with the cinematic legacy of the gangster films that emerged from the historical period depicted in the series. While it is possible to understand the series' aesthetic engagement with the gangster film solely as a function of the kinds of cultural legitimation common amongst prestige television series, from a representational perspective it also points to the contrasting approaches taken in relation to the subject of prohibition. As discussed in the chapter on the series, *Boardwalk Empire*'s stylistic construction does not rise to the level of pastiche, but rather utilises various techniques and devices that invoke the impression of an earlier aesthetic register. Partly this is done to achieve a sense of verisimilitude, but it also allows for moments of particular significance (which are very often scenes of violence) to disrupt the typical aesthetic approach and offer an additional layer of emphasis. The care with which the lush set dressing and costuming are lit and photographed is made to seem particularly jarring when contrasted with the meticulous special effects and CGI utilised to make the scenes of violence exceptionally visceral and gory, even for a series on a network that has embraced such spectacular violence as a hallmark of its claimed artistic maturity. Again, while this could be read as nothing more than a consequence of HBO's positioning of itself as distinctive within the televisual landscape, this approach also makes the violence more jarring. As with *Breaking Bad*, the violence on *Boardwalk Empire* is frequently represented as viscerally as possible, making it distinctive and dissimilar to the scenes taking place around it.

One consequence of this approach is that violence is able to be both widespread within the narrative, and also aesthetically disruptive both in terms of its function within the narrative (killing off particular characters and altering the direction of the story) and in relation to the way it is composed. This reflects how violence functions in relation to the representation of Prohibition, in that it becomes the chief mechanism through which characters at every level of the narrative attempt to carve out an area of the marketplace for themselves and their associates. This is one of the major points of overlap between *Boardwalk Empire* and *The Wire*. In *The Wire*, Marlo's rise to power is directly linked to his willingness to use violence and the effectiveness of Chris and Snoop as perpetrators of violence. While Marlo is cunning in various ways, at every significant stage of his ascension the means he utilises to reach the next level of power and control is through murder. In *Boardwalk Empire*, the beginning of the series shows how concentrated the power and control of the elite is within both the criminal world and the political one – it is a closed system maintained for the benefit of the elite, to the point where Nucky can exist at the top of the heap and still think of himself as an essentially decent person. Prohibition's arrival prompts an immediate breakdown of the hierarchies existing within society as the prospect of nearly untold criminal wealth becomes available to anyone with, as Jimmy puts it, the 'gumption' to take it – which really means the willingness to use violence.

A further similarity between *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* is the emphasis placed on how the opportunity for wealth creation produced by prohibition not only produces violence amongst market competitors, but also corrupts legitimate institutions. In *The Wire* this corruption tends to be of a less overt kind, involving political campaign contributions from questionable sources and the willingness of businesspeople to legitimise drug barons as long as they can consistently drain money from them at the same time. In *Boardwalk Empire* there is no subtlety at all – prohibition agents are typically portrayed as salaried employees of bootlegging operations just like drivers and bodyguards. Nucky's political influence is depicted as extending to the very highest levels of government and directly implicates many senior members of the Harding

administration as little more than well-placed bootleggers offering immunity in exchange for direct cash bribes. In *Breaking Bad* this is resolutely not the case – there is no suggestion of corruption at any level of officialdom, and the police are resolutely represented as fundamentally honest and dedicated in their pursuit of drug criminals. The only corruption of any kind is located within private companies, and even then it is still represented as a result of individual ‘bad apples’ operating outside the knowledge of their institutions.

Of the three case studies, *Breaking Bad*’s visual style is by far the most ostentatious, utilising extremes of camera distance and closeness, as well as the recurrence of shots where the camera is physically attached to part of the diegetic environment (the end of a shovel, the inside of a clothes dryer). While these are some of the more noticeable tropes of its aesthetic construction, the really significant aspect of *Breaking Bad*’s aesthetic strategies, particularly as they relate to the representation of prohibition, is the degree to which the style of the show is used to express the subjectivity of the central protagonists. As argued above, the naturalistic style employed by *The Wire* facilitates the representational and thematic focus of the series by downplaying its status as a constructed fiction and enhancing the idea that it offers a more or less accurate account of the settings and institutions being represented. The centrifugal narrative facilitates the ambitious scope of the representational field by accumulating a wealth of information and establishing long-running chains of cause and effect that allow the consequences of official policies and directives to be comprehended across vast networks of characters. The inverse is true of *Breaking Bad*, as the intensity of the centripetal narrative focus on the core group of characters is facilitated by the use of style in ways that reflect, enhance or complicate the themes developing in the story as a whole. The style of the series may be one of the most recognisable aspects of the series, but it is not primarily decorative, it is expressive. This is true of all three case studies to varying degrees, but in *Breaking Bad* this use of style becomes not only an essential part of the audience’s alignment with Walt’s subjectivity, but also a reflection of the fundamental ambiguity that makes it such a challenging text for representational analysis.

By maintaining such a strong commitment to the centripetal drive of the narrative, *Breaking Bad* frustrates any attempt to discern whether the representation of prohibition might be understood as indicative of more general conditions, or whether it is specific to the central protagonist and his story. While there are certainly aspects of the representation that are built off of the same basic assumptions underpinning *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* in terms of how prohibition generates wealth and violence in roughly equal quantities, beyond these areas the conception of prohibition as a system becomes increasingly opaque. The centrifugal narrative of *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* places the central storylines in a wider context, allowing for the appreciation of the ways in which each individual's story is both specific to them as characters, but also reflective of broader trends that drive individual behaviour within the social and institutional spaces being depicted. Nucky is both an autonomous, distinctive character with a complex psychological profile, but he is also shown to exist within a broader historical context where his ability to determine the course his life takes is often outside of his control, or is severely curtailed. In *Breaking Bad*, the deliberate lack of context means that the alignment with Walter White is of a degree of intensity that is unusual for television of any kind, but it also means that the story is much harder to conceive of as representative of wider trends, because not only the narrative but the style of the series is so intimately bound up with the experiences of one character.

Representation and Narrative Organisation

This ambiguity is why the idea of re-watching is so comparatively important to the understanding of how *Breaking Bad* represents the topic of prohibition, and how it functions more generally. Neither of the other case studies offers any overt engagement with the 'operational aesthetic' – even with the flashbacks to Nucky's past the emphasis is on providing character depth, rather than the kind of ludic re-ordering or re-contextualising articulated by Mittell. While this is also part of the aesthetic approach taken in *Breaking Bad* (as with the

flashbacks in the season 1 moment discussed in the previous chapter), there are numerous occasions where narrative trickery is foregrounded, often for the sake of the series' darkly ironic humour. However, it is not the appreciation of the operational aesthetic that makes re-watching *Breaking Bad* a significant experience, but rather the opportunity it gives for the viewer to achieve some separation between themselves and Walt as a character, which the intensity of alignment that occurs on an initial viewing makes particularly challenging. By doing so, it becomes possible to identify how heavily the style of the show influences the interpretation of narrative events, and more generally the representational attitude established regarding those events and how they relate to the subject of prohibition more generally. It also offers a compelling demonstration of why it is so important not to neglect questions of style and aesthetic construction when analysing television series, either from a representational perspective or any other. Knowing where the narrative leads offers the possibility of identifying particular moments that previously appeared to be straightforward, but on reflection are highly ambiguous or inscrutable. Is Walt's development of an alter-ego to be understood in the same way as Nucky's transition from half-gangster to full-gangster? That is, can it be understood as an allegorical commentary on the way that the conditions produced by prohibition invariably compel even ostensibly moralistic people to capitulate to their worst and most destructive impulses?

An initial viewing might suggest this is the case – Walt's adoption of the Heisenberg iconography and name occur in the same sequence where he is compelled to confront the vicious and unstable Tuco, so this would seem a reasonable supposition. It is only when one begins to appreciate how the *mise-en-scène* is employed expressively to create the recurring trope of the doppelgänger that it becomes possible to conceive of a different interpretation. This can only happen on a second viewing, since it is highly improbable that the first time viewer (even one sensitive to such concerns) would notice the recurring pattern that develops gradually over the course of several seasons. Yet once the pattern is established through re-watching, the

question of what initiates Walt's protracted personality shift seems far less certain, as the *mise-en-scène* implies it is the cancer diagnosis, rather than the conditions of the drug trade. Walt may become the monster he ends up as because he was compelled to by the need to survive in the prohibited marketplace, or that monstrosity may always have been there, it just found its true calling once the knowledge of his own mortality began to channel the roiling bundle of resentments and disappointments he has carried with him his whole life.

This process of uncertainty runs throughout the series and consequently makes any substantial articulation of its tonal approach to the representation of prohibition so imprecise. The portrayal of the Mexican cartels initially appears to represent them as utterly other, and thus almost as manifestations of pure malevolence that exists outside of any broader context. Yet, as previously observed, it could also be interpreted as a consequence of the behaviour of American consumers of drugs, since the Salamanca cousins are motivated to make their murderous excursion into the United States as a consequence of Walt's actions. The characterisation of Gus could be seen as markedly inconsistent – calm, collected, cautious and cerebral in the second and third seasons; irrationally violent and supernaturally omniscient in the fourth. Yet a close re-watching establishes that in every seemingly unfathomable action that Gus takes in the fourth season there is the same methodical intelligence underpinning his decisions – it is just that the viewer's subjective access to the story is so filtered through Walt's increasingly paranoid and frantic mind-set that they cannot be easily perceived.

What most separates *Breaking Bad* from the other two case studies is that while its set-up, location and characters give the appearance of embracing the broader social, political and representational context in which the narrative occurs, it constantly undermines and frustrates this impulse. This is most obvious in the scenes mentioned in the previous chapter in which conversations between Walt and Hank, or Walt and Gale, address the question of prohibition directly. The inclusion of scenes where the authority and justifiableness of prohibition as a

system of government control are openly debated would appear to be encouraging the viewer to try and situate the story being presented within this larger context. Hank's traumatic experiences working in El Paso, Gus' various power struggles with different cartels, the exporting of the blue meth to the Czech Republic – all these narrative threads gesture towards larger themes relating to prohibition, but without developing them further. El Paso certainly invokes the wider spectre of the kind of spectacular and grotesque violence associated with Mexican drug cartels, but within the story its main function is defined in relation to Hank's experience of PTSD, rather than as a starting point for engaging with a particular representational topic. The shift in locations that occur in *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* are almost always motivated by the conditions of their respective prohibited markets – *The Wire* shifts its focus to the schools in order to represent how the children who live in communities overwhelmed by the drug trade are trapped within that context. In *Boardwalk Empire* the introduction of additional locales like Ireland, Florida and Cuba is directly connected to the opportunities for more effective or profitable bootlegging that they provide. Prohibition is the central context in both series, and it provides both a thematic and narrative link between many disparate parts of the story. With *Breaking Bad*, the representation of prohibition and the gradual articulation of its pervasiveness through many different areas of society are far less central to the drive of the narrative. These are subtle gradations because all three series locate so much of their running time within the representational field of prohibition, yet *Breaking Bad* perpetually keeps the wider context at arm's length, invoking it only when it is necessary to introduce a new threat or complication that Walt and Jesse must overcome.

It is here that the difference between the centrifugal and centripetal narration is most pronounced, and where the benefit of considering issues of representation within this framework are most evident. However, the influence of each approach is not a binary in which centrifugal series do context and centripetal series do psychology. *Boardwalk Empire* embraces both forms of complexity, yet even within the centripetal storyline there is a wider awareness and

engagement with the representational context of prohibition that is not present in *Breaking Bad*. It is less about the split between context and psychology, or what Mittell characterises as breadth and depth, but more about the way each series invites the viewer to consider the actions and behaviours of the characters. A more accurate accompanying spectrum might align centrifugal narration with relativism and centripetal with moralism. *The Wire* is committed to providing as broad a context as possible in order to indicate how circumscribed the choices of many of the characters are, regardless of good intentions. Good and bad people exist within each institution to varying degrees, but this is not what ultimately determines their fates – particularly in regards to prohibition, the series frequently emphasises how the systems in place facilitate the success of harmful, destructive characters (Marlo chief amongst them), and mitigate against the efforts of altruistic characters (Colvin). *Boardwalk Empire* places greater emphasis on the moral conflict experienced by Nucky as he ventures further and further into the bootlegging trade, but it also features characters like Al Capone who resorts to violence impulsively and without regard for the consequences, and yet only continues to grow more powerful and influential because of it. Again, the provision of a broad representational context provides the opportunity to represent prohibition as a system that not only rewards and empowers the vicious and cruel, but also compels characters who are not by nature violent to become increasingly so as a means of survival within the marketplace. Questions of morality are not avoided by the series, but they are shown to be choices existing within specific conditions caused by the Prohibition of alcohol, limiting the ability of the individual to overcome their circumstances, even when possessed of the kind of power and influence that most characters on *The Wire* could only dream of.

In both *The Wire* and *Boardwalk Empire* there are characters who are deeply malignant and destructive, but who do not experience any significant hardship within the narrative because their malignancy plays out within a context that not only facilitates their worst tendencies, but actively encourages them. They are great generators of suffering, but they do not suffer

significantly themselves. In *Breaking Bad* this is overwhelmingly not the case. The suffering that the characters experience in response to wrongdoing is not always apportioned equally, but it is always a consequence. As with Nucky in *Boardwalk Empire*, for Walt the costs associated with his involvement in the prohibited marketplace are articulated in terms of isolation – by their final episodes both Nucky and Walt are living entirely isolated from friends, family and society in general. Nucky lives in a hotel standing in the middle of an empty beachfront with nobody but his bodyguards for company, in a somewhat futile attempt to ensure that he cannot be ambushed by his enemies. In the penultimate episode of the *Breaking Bad*, Walt finds himself struggling for survival in an isolated cabin, loathed by his family and society at large for the crimes he has committed under the Heisenberg mantle. Yet while Nucky is able to acknowledge that it is his actions and his inability to escape the lure of bootlegging that has brought him to this point, Walt can't quite bring himself to accept responsibility, which ultimately motivates him to make his fateful return to Albuquerque. Everyone that Walt has cared about in the series has suffered mightily as a result of his actions. Skyler is barely making ends meet, is a pariah in her community and remains a potential suspect. Walt Junior has lost his beloved uncle and the father who he idolised. Marie (Betsy Brandt) has lost her husband. Jesse has suffered so many tragedies that it is difficult to know which to emphasise – he has had both of the women he loved most killed as a result of their brief associations with the drug trade, and his surrogate son, Brock, is now an orphan. He has lost one of his best friends to a turf war murder, has been forced to kill in order to save Walt and himself, as well as being tortured and kept as a slave by a gang of Neo-Nazis. Comparatively, Walt has really only suffered to the degree that he has finally been exposed to the world as the person he is, rather than the façade he constructed. Suffering is built into the core of *Breaking Bad* in a way that neither other case study can match, even though they each contain their own wrenching storylines of victimhood and pain.

An instructive, episode-long demonstration of this point comes in '4 Days Out' (s02e09), where Walt and Jesse spend a long weekend cooking meth together out in the New Mexico desert.

Breaking Bad operates a kind of karmic morality where no bad deed goes unpunished, with any triumphs that Walt and Jesse experience inevitably resulting in some form of attendant suffering. In the episode, after sustained and productive work, Walt and Jesse weigh all the meth they have produced and Walt calculates how much the batch is worth. Upon discovering that they each stand to make \$672,000, the partners celebrate with a level of triumph and excitement not usually seen between them, with Jesse even inducing Walt to give him a vigorous high-five. Immediately following this cathartic outburst, however, the electrical generator loses power and they discover that the battery to the RV has gone flat. There then follows three days of increasingly desperate and painful suffering before Walt manages to fashion a makeshift battery and get the RV running again. The moment of elation at the prospect of all the money they can make from the drugs is immediately counterbalanced by the discomfort and desolation that they experience over the next three days.

One could view the ordeal that Walt and Jesse experience in ‘4 Days Out’ either as a kind of karmic retribution for how much crystal meth they have produced, or a simple consequence arising from the conditions mandated by the drug trade. Under this reading, the reason they are stranded is because of the nature of their enterprise – what they are doing is illegal, so they travel far into the desert to better evade surveillance, but in doing so they put themselves at risk if something goes wrong (like the battery running flat). Are they suffering because they have made a large amount of a societally detrimental substance, or are they suffering because the substance they have made is illegal, forcing them to travel to isolated areas in order to produce it? One interpretation presents drug dealing as morally wrong and Walt and Jesse as to some degree deserving of the hardship that befalls them. The other perspective views prohibition as the cause of their pain and discomfort, because the conditions it produces force Walt and Jesse into a situation where they are particularly vulnerable to what would normally be a trivial inconvenience. The length and complexity of the series means that there is no shortage of examples that could support either perspective, but the fact that many of those examples could

be used for either argument is an indication of how ambiguously the subject is treated. The fact that the series is able to acknowledge the applicability of prohibition debates to *Breaking Bad* without ever developing them seems ample indication that their interests lie more in the ambiguity of interpretation than any strong desire for representational fidelity.

While the analysis of *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* hews fairly closely to the conclusions Mittell also drew about the uses to which the different kinds of narrative complexity can be put, the chapter on *Boardwalk Empire* indicates that there is some flexibility within them as well. To return to the influence of the classic gangster cycle and *The Roaring Twenties* on *Boardwalk Empire*, the following comparison offers some contrasts. While the centrifugal/centripetal framework is specific to fully-serialised television series, if one were to map Mittell's original formulation onto *Boardwalk Empire*'s generic influences, the breakdown would be as follows. *Little Caesar* and *Scarface* would lie towards the heavily centripetal end of the spectrum – they are tightly aligned to a central character whose singular personality and willpower form the driving force behind the narrative and form the basis of their rise to power. Context is barely a factor – it can be intuited from what is known about the historical period and the debt the films owe to the real-life story of Al Capone, but within the storyworld prohibition plays an almost invisible role. *Public Enemy* would fall closer to the centripetal end of the scale, but to a lesser extent than the previous two films because it emphasises the historical context, and Prohibition is presented as the point in the narrative where the characters go from small-time hoods to big shot gangsters. Tom Powers is still a vibrant and forceful character, but his representation as a man outside of historical context is far less pronounced than it is for the protagonists of *Little Cesar* or *Scarface*. Finally, *The Roaring Twenties* is heavily centrifugal in its nature. Rather than a single central protagonist the film has three, each of which is given their own trajectory but all of whom are primarily defined by their relationship to Prohibition. Rather than emphasising the specialness of the main bootlegger, the film goes out of its way to repeatedly emphasise that he is merely one of many thousands of others who recognised that Prohibition offered an

exceptional opportunity to get rich quick, and unsurprisingly jumped at the chance. The frequent use of fictional newsreels is a particularly overt technique that emphasises how beholden to the historical context the film's characters are, and that Prohibition as an institution is sweeping them along in its considerable wake.

As should be apparent, this analysis fits these films comfortably within Mittell's articulation, with the centrifugal *Roaring Twenties* providing a systemic and contextual approach, and *Scarface* and *Little Caesar* overwhelmingly ignoring the broader context to emphasise the specificity of individual characters and their psychology. Yet if one considers *Boardwalk Empire* and how its centrifugal and centripetal narrative lines function, what is surprising is that they significantly subvert this paradigm. Nucky is at the clear centre of the centripetal narrative, yet despite how closely aligned the viewer is to him both spatio-temporally and subjectively, his ability to act as master of his own destiny is repeatedly shown to be mostly illusory. The degree to which he wants to extricate himself from the bootlegging trade is very rarely a significant influence on whether he actually is able to do so. The actions of other characters, often those more ruthless than himself or more willing to immerse themselves in the darkness and violence that pervades the bootlegging marketplace, are typically shown to compel him to stay immersed in a world that he knows is corrosive and toxic. Certainly there are weaknesses in Nucky's character (his inability to turn down a criminal enterprise if doing so would enrich someone else being the chief one) that contribute to his continued failure to extricate himself from bootlegging. He is not absolved of the decisions he makes, but as with many of the characters in *The Wire* and *The Roaring Twenties*, he is represented as being caught up in forces that his backstory and personality make him particularly vulnerable to. Yet this representation of prohibition as a sweeping and transformative social, political and economic force is carried predominantly by the centripetal storyline – the exact opposite of what might be expected were Mittell's original categories were applied to questions of representation.

On the other side, the storylines involving Luciano and Lansky are contained within the centrifugal narrative structure, where they are two characters within at least a dozen others given significant screen time over the course of the series' run. The depiction of the two characters, as already demonstrated, involves a significant amount of inference regarding the broader account of the historical period. While the characters are elaborated as the series develops and pieces of backstory (such as the circumstances behind their initial partnership) are provided, but this is still done in the service of the larger historical trend they represent wherein the wealth generated by Prohibition persuaded the Young Turks to break down the ethnic barriers between them and eventually overthrow the Moustache Petes and take control of American organised crime. While Luciano and Lansky have clearly defined personalities that undergo a certain amount of maturation over the course of the narrative, they are far more defined by their actions and their partnership than by their individual psychology. They have no special degree of alignment with the viewer either spatio-temporally or subjectively, and until the final season they remain in subordinate positions to older and more established gangsters, limiting their ability to determine the outcome of events. Yet they have far more in common with the protagonists of *Little Caesar* or *Scarface* than with any of the characters in the centrifugal films or series. They are represented not as pawns in a much larger historical game, but as the ultimate victors in that game whose abilities are specific and singular. The only difference is that what makes them special is their partnership with one another, rather than their qualities as individuals. They are not the victims of history but the masters of it.

The consequence of this as it relates to the question of how efficacious the centrifugal/centripetal paradigm is for the analysis of representation is that it somewhat muddles the easy application of the categories to a given text. The fact that the Nucky storyline can be centripetally driven and yet carry the central representational articulation of Prohibition as a destructive and overwhelmingly harmful system is still predicated on the influence of the centrifugal parts of the story. It is in large part because the series provides a broad range of

approaches to the bootlegging trade that it becomes possible to discern how unsuited to it Nucky often is. What it really suggests is that for representational fields that demand a broad contextual framework, centrifugal narration is something of a prerequisite, even though it can still function effectively when accompanied by a more centripetal approach to a core character or group of characters. Indeed, as long as there is at least some centrifugal aspects to the story, the representation of a subject like prohibition can be adequately accommodated alongside more character-based thematic interests. It is really only when the centripetal narration is taken to its extremes that it becomes difficult to offer anything other than a vague representational account, since the closeness of the alignment with the central characters frustrates attempts to read their experiences as more generally representative of the conditions prevailing within the context provided. Even here, however, this conclusion is by no means a certainty. As discussed in the *Breaking Bad* chapter, there are numerous instances where the series invokes a broader representational context only to close down any extended engagement with the issues arising from it. Yet this seems like far more of a product of the series' rigorous commitment to the idea of uncertainty epitomised by the Heisenberg alter-ego (both stylistically and referentially) than an insurmountable obstacle necessitated by the narrative organisation.

Applicability of the Centrifugal/Centripetal Spectrum

In discussing the benefits of re-watching when analysing issues of representation (and anything else for that matter) the focus has been on the degree of alignment between the audience and the central characters, and the difficulty of assessing this balance on only one viewing. Throughout this research there has been far less attention paid to the notion of character allegiance, and there are two reasons for this. The first is that the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum is far more a matter of assessing the audience's spatio-temporal and subjective alignment with the characters rather than the degree to which they are allied with them. The second is that determinations of

allegiance are far more a matter of subjective interpretation than assessing degrees of alignment, and so unless an understanding of the possible range of allegiances was integral to a broader argument, they have been omitted. While some of the analysis of how prohibition is represented has involved discussing audience allegiance, this is not of primary importance to considerations of how useful the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum can be. Allegiance is far more a product of the attitudes and beliefs of the individual viewer and the specifics of the programmes being viewed, limiting the possibility of developing a more comprehensive rule of thumb governing this issue. However, the relationship between centrifugal/centripetal complexity and audience alignment does appear to be much more relevant for establishing some general principles regarding the subject.

As discussed in the literature review, one of the established tropes of prestige drama series is the long-running audience alignment with antiheroic protagonists, viewed by some scholars as a type of viewing experience somewhat distinct to long-form television drama. Current cognitive-derived scholarship on the subjective of audience alignment and allegiance with antiheroic characters posits a causal relationship between the amount of spatio-temporal alignment the audience has with a character and the likelihood that the audience will be willing to overlook or excuse the types of behaviour that make that character and antihero in the first place. This is predicated on research suggesting that people are more inclined to soften their attitudes to misbehaviour if they are given more information and backstory regarding the individual misbehaving. Yet this perspective makes little concession to the fact that in long-form television series the audience is not asked to only assess one action at a time, after which the slate is wiped clean until the next transgression occurs. Particularly in fully-serialised immense texts like the case studies, what really defines the viewing experience is the accumulation of actions and consequences over the entire breadth of the narrative. While the idea of relative morality emphasised by Mittell, Murray Smith and others certainly seems applicable when attempting comparisons between closely-aligned characters and distantly-aligned ones, this may well be

subject to change the more terrible things the audience witnesses the closely-aligned character doing. A character committing a violent murder in a representational context like prohibition may well be more mitigable than if it occurred in a less cut-throat milieu. But if that character carries out repeated murders it would seem plausible that the audience's willingness to excuse or overlook this behaviour might become more strained, since the repetition of the act would constrain the ability of the audience to see the action as an outlier, and would become more clearly an expression of the character's individual subjectivity. This account of the relationship between spatio-temporal alignment and audience allegiance also overlooks the possibility that, as with Walter White, the transgressions of the central character could become less mitigated by circumstances, or could grow in their destructiveness or cold-bloodedness, either of which would be likely to influence the willingness of audience allegiance.

The benefit of thinking about fully-serialised immense texts through the lens of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum is that it emphasises the importance of audience alignment with central characters (whether or not they are antiheroic) in a way that doesn't imply any overt relationship between alignment and allegiance, but does at least suggest general thematic concerns. As Mittell already indicated, for series more concerned with character psychology the narrative is likely to work centripetally, which in turn is defined in relation to the alignment between the audience and the protagonist. Yet what really defines this connection is not the spatio-temporal attachment but the subjective access – spatio-temporal attachment can be correlated with allegiance, but subjective access can materially alter the ability of the audience to determine the extent of their allegiance by influencing the aesthetic construction of the entire series. Centrifugal narration is far more a matter of establishing connections and broad webs of cause and effect where the experience of individuals is less central to the overall story, and consequently subjective access is generally consistent and typically restrained. What becomes most important in centrifugal narratives is not the subjectivity of individual characters but the

ability of the narrative to move between different settings, storylines and characters – in other words its spatio-temporal attachment.

The conclusions about the influence that subjective access to characters can have on the aesthetic construction of a series are evidence that there are considerable benefits to be derived from approaches to textual analysis that place greater emphasis on questions of style, even when that is not the main focus of the analysis. While the close reading approach to style is an approach currently associated with evaluative criticism in television, this is not a prerequisite. It is not necessarily the case that close reading involves advancing interpretations regarding the meaning and influence of numerous aesthetic and narrative elements, any of which may well strike other observers in markedly different ways. This is an inescapable consequence of any approach that involves textual analysis, but it is not a flaw in the approach. Only by acknowledging those aspects of scholarship that are the product of individual subjectivity does it become possible to begin articulating those features that extend beyond individual tastes or perspectives. That being said, I believe that the analysis I have carried out in this thesis has been contextualised and specific, and that it has overwhelmingly been drawn from the most authoritative sources possible, namely the three case study texts. While this has allowed for more general tendencies and theoretical models to be explored and developed in ways that are not entirely reliant on the specifics of each case study, they arose from a sustained, comprehensive close reading of the texts born of multiple viewings and sensitive to all aspects of the formal properties. Whether evaluative in its aims or not, the value of textual analysis and the applicability of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum are both issues that this thesis has shown to be significant in the on-going development of television studies as a discipline.

In considering how the issues addressed in this research could be developed, a number of possibilities present themselves. The applicability of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum within television studies will necessarily be predicated on the extent to which fully-serialised immense

drama series continue to function as beneficial markers of distinction for the channels and online libraries that produce and/or distribute them. While this thesis has outlined some reasons why programming of this type seems likely to remain and expand, it is also undeniably the case that the television industry is always in flux, and that the speed with which viewing practices have shifted in multiple ways over the past decade militates against easy assumptions. However, if one accepts that the enthusiasm for online streaming and downloading does not seem likely to diminish, the centrifugal/centripetal designation does offer a meaningful way of beginning to analyse how fully-serialised series function. In particular, the integration of Smith's structure of sympathy with the articulation of the centrifugal/centripetal spectrum could be usefully explored in relation to the difficulties facing scholars attempting to apply cognitive theory to television studies, especially in relation to antiheroes. This perspective emphasises not merely *that* the audience is aligned with antiheroic characters, but *how* that alignment is achieved, and how these differences can be understood to impact the question of audience allegiance. Moreover, in relation to the cognitive challenges that are posed by the extensive accumulation of detail in fully-serialised immense dramas, the centrifugal/centripetal distinction may well prove to be meaningful. Research might be usefully undertaken to consider whether there is a difference in the type of information viewers process in relation to immense narratives – for instance, whether there is a difference between recalling a lot of information about a small number of characters, and recalling a small amount of information about a large number of characters. Furthermore, as more fully-serialised shows are produced and/or completed, the number of relevant works for analysis will increase, offering a wider corpus for more quantitative approaches to investigate.

Another area that could be usefully explored in relation to the findings of this research is the subject of prohibition and its representation within recent American television. While the case studies in this research were selected mainly for their narrative organisation, the subject of prohibition made them particularly valuable as examples, since the subject offered such a broad range of subject matter that could be represented. While differing in degrees of emphasis,

stylistic approach, narrative structure and character alignment, there remained considerable overlap between all three series regarding the consequences that arise from prohibition, and how they influence the behaviour of those operating within the system. I believe it is worth considering whether the similarities between these three shows (both in terms of the prohibition setting and the way it is represented) should be understood only as a consequence of the opportunities they provide for illicit content, or whether they can also be conceived as an expression of a wider anxiety regarding the subject of prohibition felt by the audience being targeted by such programmes. It seems notable that within the relatively small range of prestige dramas produced in the last fifteen years there are at least eight long-running series that have been substantially concerned with issues arising from the topic of prohibition (*Weeds*, *True Blood*, *Narcos*, *The Shield*, *Justified*, *The Wire*, *Breaking Bad*, *Boardwalk Empire*). As these series have all been part of the prestige television wave (and thus aimed at a broadly similar niche audience demographic) they suggest that, at least for the ‘quality’ audience, there is considerable unease and ambiguity regarding the externalities produced by modern drug prohibition. This possibility offers an excellent starting point for exploring Amanda Lotz’s idea of the sub-cultural forum (adapted from Newcomb and Hirsch) wherein programming aimed at a particular audience can provide a range of perspectives that enable the viewer to work through anxieties arising around particular social issues, like prohibition. More generally, I believe this research has demonstrated the importance of considering prohibition as an area of inquiry independent of more specific representational questions like how individual drugs or drug users are characterised. As fully-serialised television series become more prevalent and the opportunities they offer for the development of narrative, character, theme and representation become better appreciated, a new critical language and perspective will become increasingly important. The exploration of the representational relationship between centrifugal and centripetal complexity in this research has hopefully indicated some of the benefits and challenges that this form of television will offer going forward.

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Teleography: Case Studies

The Wire

Created by David Simon and Ed Burns, Prod. HBO, USA, 2002-2008. **Principal Directors:** Joe Chappelle, Ernest R. Dickinson, Clark Johnson, Ed Bianchi. **Principal Writers:** David Simon, Ed Burns, Joy Kecken, Rafael Alvarez, Chris Collins, George Pelecanos. **Executive Producers:** David Simon, Nina Kostroff-Noble, Robert F. Colesberry. **Main Cast:** Dominic West (Det. James 'Jimmy' McNulty), Idris Elba (Russell 'Stringer' Bell), Wood Harris (Avon Barksdale), Jamie Hector (Marlo Stanfield).

Boardwalk Empire

Created by Terence Winter, Prod. HBO, USA, 2010-2014. **Principal Directors:** Tim Van Patten, Allen Coulter, Jeremy Podeswa, Ed Bianchi. **Principal Writers:** Terence Winter, Howard Korder, Cristine Chambers. **Executive Producers:** Terence Winter, Tim Van Patten, Howard Korder, Martin Scorsese. **Main Cast:** Steve Buscemi (Nucky Thompson), Kelly MacDonald (Margaret Schroder), Stephen Graham (Al Capone), Vincent Piazza (Lucky Luciano).

Breaking Bad

Created by Vince Gilligan, Prod. AMC/Sony Pictures Television, USA, 2008-2013. **Principal Directors:** Michelle MacLaren, Adam Bernstein, Vince Gilligan. **Principal Writers:** Vince Gilligan, George Mastras, Peter Gould, Moira Walley-Beckett, Sam Catlin. **Executive Producers:** Vince Gilligan, Melissa Bernstein, Mark Johnson. **Main Cast:** Bryan Cranston (Walter White), Aaron Paul (Jesse Pinkman), Anna Gunn (Skyler White), Dean Norris (Hank Schrader), Giancarlo Esposito (Gustavo Fring).

The Wire – Episodes Referenced

‘Port in a Storm’, episode twelve, *The Wire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 24.08.2003. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Robert F. Colesberry.

‘The Target’, episode one, *The Wire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 02.06.2002. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Clark Johnson.

‘The Cost’, episode ten, *The Wire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 11.08.2002. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Brad Anderson.

‘Ebb Tide’, episode one, *The Wire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 01.06.2003. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Ed Bianchi.

‘Backwash’, episode seven, *The Wire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 13.07.2003. Writer: Rafael Alvarez, Dir: Thomas J. Wright.

‘Stray Rounds’, episode nine, *The Wire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 03.08.2003. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Time After Time’, episode one, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 19.09.2004. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Ed Bianchi.

‘All Due Respect’, episode two, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 26.09.2004. Writer: Richard Price, Dir: Steve Shill.

‘Hamsterdam’, episode four, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 10.10.2004. Writer: George Pelecanos, Dir: Ernest Dickerson.

‘Homecoming’, episode six, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 31.10.2004. Writer: Rafael Alvarez, Dir: Leslie Libman.

‘Back Burners’, episode seven, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 07.11.2004. Writer: Joy Lusco, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Moral Midgetry’, episode eight, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 14.11.2004. Writer: Richard Price, Dir: Agnieszka Holland.

‘Reformation’, episode ten, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 28.14.2004. Writer: Ed Burns, Dir: Christine Moore.

‘Middle Ground’, episode eleven, *The Wire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 12.12.2004. Writer: George Pelecanos, Dir: Joe Chappelle.

‘Boys of Summer’, episode one, *The Wire*, fourth series, US, HBO, tx. 10.09.2006. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Joe Chappelle.

‘More with Less’, episode one, *The Wire*, fifth series, US, HBO, tx. 06.01.2008. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Joe Chappelle.

‘Unconfirmed Reports’, episode two, *The Wire*, fifth series, US, HBO, tx. 13.01.2008. Writer: William F. Zorzi, Dir: Ernest Dickerson.

‘React Quotes’, episode five, *The Wire*, fifth series, US, HBO, tx. 03.02.2008. Writer: David Mills, Dir: Agnieszka Holland.

‘Late Editions’, episode nine, *The Wire*, fifth series, US, HBO, tx. 02.03.2008. Writer: George Pelecanos, Dir: Joe Chappelle.

‘-30-’, episode ten, *The Wire*, fifth series, US, HBO, tx. 09.03.2008. Writer: David Simon, Dir: Clark Johnson.

Boardwalk Empire – Episodes Referenced

‘Boardwalk Empire’, episode one, *Boardwalk Empire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 19.09.10.

Writer: Terence Winter, Dir: Martin Scorsese.

‘The Ivory Tower’, episode two, *Boardwalk Empire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 26.09.2010.

Writer: Terence Winter, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Family Limitation’, episode six, *Boardwalk Empire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 24.10.2010.

Writer: Howard Korder, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Hold Me in Paradise’, episode eight, *Boardwalk Empire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 07.11.2010.

Writer: Meg Jackson, Dir: Brian Kirk.

‘Belle Femme’, episode nine, *Boardwalk Empire*, first series, US, HBO, tx. 14.11.2010. Writer:

Steve Kornacki, Dir: Brad Anderson.

‘Ourselves Alone’, episode two, *Boardwalk Empire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 02.10.2011.

Writer: Terence Winter, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘A Dangerous Maid’, episode three, *Boardwalk Empire*, second series, US, HBO tx. 09.10.2011.

Writer: Itamar Moses, Dir: Susanna White.

‘Georgia Peaches’, episode ten, *Boardwalk Empire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 27.11.2011.

Writer: David Flebotte, Dir: Jeremy Podeswa.

‘To the Lost’, episode twelve, *Boardwalk Empire*, second series, US, HBO, tx. 11.12.2011.

Writer: Terence Winter, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Resolution’, episode one, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 16.09.12. Writer:

Terence Winter, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Blue Bell Boy’, episode four, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 07.10.2012.

Writer: Chris Haddock, Dir: Jeremy Podeswa.

‘You’d Be Surprised’, episode five, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 14.10.2012,

Writer: Diane Frolov and Andrew Schneider, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Bone for Tuna’, episode seven, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 28.10.2012.

Writer: Howard Korder, Dir: Allen Coulter.

‘The Milkmaid’s Lot’, episode nine, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 11.11.2012.

Writer: Rolin Jones, Dir: Ed Bianchi.

‘A Man, a Plan...’, episode ten, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 18.11.2012.

Writer: Dave Flebotte, Dir: Jeremy Podeswa.

‘Margate Sands’, episode twelve, *Boardwalk Empire*, third series, US, HBO, tx. 02.12.2012.

Writer: Terence Winter and Howard Korder, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘New York Sour’, episode one, *Boardwalk Empire*, fourth series, US, HBO, tx. 08.09.2013.

Writer: Howard Korder, Dir: Tim Van Patten.

‘Acres of Diamonds’, episode three, *Boardwalk Empire*, fourth series, US, HBO, tx. 22.09.2013.

Writer: Terence Winter, Dir: Allen Coulter.

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‘Cat’s in the Bag...’, episode two, *Breaking Bad*, first series, US, AMC, tx. 27.01.2008. Writer: Vince Gilligan, Dir: Adam Bernstein.

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‘Crazy Handful of Nothin’’, episode six, *Breaking Bad*, first series, US, AMC, tx. 02.03.2008. Writer: George Mastras, Dir: Bronwen Hughes.

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‘Seven Thirty-Seven’, episode one, *Breaking Bad*, second series, US, AMC, tx. 08.03.2009. Writer: J. Roberts, Dir: Bryan Cranston.

‘Breakage’, episode five, *Breaking Bad*, second series, US, AMC, tx. 05.04.2009. Writer: Moira Walley-Beckett, Dir: Johan Renck.

‘Negro Y Azul’, episode seven, *Breaking Bad*, second series, US, AMC, tx. 19.04.2009. Writer: John Shiban, Dir: Felix Alcala.

‘4 Days Out’, episode nine, *Breaking Bad*, second series, US, AMC, tx. 03.05.2009. Writer: Sam Catlin, Dir: Michelle MacLaren.

‘Mandala’, episode eleven, *Breaking Bad*, second series, US, AMC, tx. 17.05.2009. Writer: George Mastras, Dir: Adam Bernstein.

‘Caballo Sin Nombre’, episode two, *Breaking Bad*, third series, US, AMC, tx. 28.03.2010. Writer: Peter Gould, Dir: Adam Bernstein.

‘Mas’, episode five, *Breaking Bad*, third series, US, AMC, tx. 18.04.2010. Writer: Moira Walley-Beckett, Dir: Johan Renck.

‘Sunset’, episode six, *Breaking Bad*, third series, US, AMC, tx. 25.04.2010. Writer: John Shibano, Dir: John Shibano.

‘Box Cutter’, episode one, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 17.07.2011. Writer: Vince Gilligan, Dir: Adam Bernstein.

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‘Cornered’, episode six, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 21.08.2011. Writer: Jennifer Hutchison, Dir: Michael Slovis.

‘Hermanos’, episode eight, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 04.09.2011. Writer: Sam Catlin and George Mastras, Dir: Johan Renck.

‘Bug’, episode nine, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 11.09.2011. Writer: Moira Walley-Beckett and Thomas Schnauz, Dir: Terry McDonough.

‘End Times’, episode twelve, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 02.10.2011. Writer: Thomas Schnauz and Moira Walley-Beckett, Dir: Vince Gilligan.

‘Face Off’, episode thirteen, *Breaking Bad*, fourth series, US, AMC, tx. 09.10.2011. Writer: Vince Gilligan, Dir: Vince Gilligan.

‘Blood Money’, episode nine, *Breaking Bad*, fifth series, US, AMC, tx. 11.08.2013. Writer: Peter Gould, Dir: Bryan Cranston.

‘Ozymandias’, episode fourteen, *Breaking Bad*, fifth series, US, AMC, tx. 15.09.2013. Writer: Moira Walley-Beckett, Dir: Rian Johnson.

‘Granite State’, episode fifteen, *Breaking Bad*, fifth series, US, AMC, tx. 22.09.2013. Writer: Peter Gould, Dir: Peter Gould.

‘Felina’, episode sixteen, *Breaking Bad*, fifth series, US, AMC, tx. 29.09.2013. Writer: Vince Gilligan, Dir: Vince Gilligan.

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Any Day Now, created by Nancy Miller, US, Lifetime, 1998-2002.

Big Love, created by Mark V. Olsen and Will Scheffer, US, HBO, 2006-2011.

Bloodline, created by Glenn Kessler, Todd A. Kessler and Daniel Zelman, US, Netflix, 2014- .

Bored to Death, created by Jonathan Ames, US, HBO, 2009-2011.

Broad City, created by Ilana Glazer and Abbi Jacobson, US, Comedy Central, 2014-.

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, created by Joss Whedon, US, The WB, 1997-2001 and UPN, 2001-2003.

Deadwood, created by David Milch, US, HBO, 2004-2006.

Dexter, created by James Manos Jr., US, Showtime, 2006-2013.

Edge of Darkness, created by Troy Kennedy Martin, UK, BBC2, 1985.

Game of Thrones, created by David Benioff and D. B. Weiss, US, HBO, 2014- .

Generation Kill, created by David Simon, Ed Burns and Evan Wright, US, HBO, 2008.

Hill Street Blues, created by Steven Bochco and Michael Kozoll, US, NBC, 1981-1987.

Homeland, created by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, US, Showtime, 2011- .

Homicide: Life on the Streets, created by Paul Attanasio, US, NBC, 1993-1999.

House of Cards, created by Beau Willimon, US, Netflix, 2013- .

Justified, created by Graham Yost, US, FX, 2010- .

Kingpin, created by David Mills, US, NBC, 2003.

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit, created by Dick Wolf, USA, NBC, 1999- .

Lost, created by Jeffrey Lieber, J. J. Abrams and Damon Lindelof, USA, ABC, 2004-2010.

Mad Men, created by Matthew Weiner, USA, AMC, 2007- .

Miami Vice, created by Anthony Yerkovich, USA, NBC, 1984-1989.

NYPD Blue, created by Steven Bochco and David Milch, USA, ABC, 1993-2005.

Orange is the New Black, created by Jenji Kohan, USA, Netflix, 2013- .

Oz, created by Tom Fontana, USA, HBO, 1997-2003.

Prohibition, created by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, USA, PBS, 2011.

Queer as Folk, created by Russell T. Davies, UK, Channel 4, 1999-2000.

Rescue Me, created by Denis Leary and Peter Tolan, USA, FX, 2004-2011.

Sense8, created by J. Michael Straczynski, Andy Wachowski and Lana Wachowski, USA, Netflix, 2015-

Silicon Valley, created by Mike Judge, John Altschuler and Dave Krinsky, USA, HBO, 2014- .

That '70s Show, created by Bonnie Turner, Terry Turner, Mark Brazill, USA, FOX, 1998-2006.

The Americans, created by Joe Weisberg, USA, FX, 2013- .

The Corner, created by David Simon, USA, HBO, 2000.

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The Shield, created by Shawn Ryan, USA, FX, 2002-2008.

The Sopranos, created by David Chase, USA, HBO, 1999-2007.

The Untouchables, created by Alan A. Armer, USA, ABC, 1959-1963

The X-Files, created by Chris Carter, USA, Fox, 1993-2002.

Traffik, created by Simon Moore, UK, Channel 4, 1989.

Transparent, created by Jill Soloway, USA, Amazon Prime, 2014- .

Treme, created by David Simon and Eric Overmyer, USA, HBO, 2010-2013.

True Blood, created by Alan Ball, USA, HBO, 2008-2014.

True Detective, created by Nic Pizzolatto, USA, HBO, 2014- .

Weeds, created by Jenji Kohan, USA, Showtime, 2005-2012.

Filmography

A Very Harold & Kumar 3D Christmas, Dir. Todd Strauss-Schulson, Prod. New Line Cinema, USA, 2011.

American Gangster, Dir. Ridley Scott, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 2007.

Angels with Dirty Faces, Dir. Michael Curtiz, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA, 1939.

Blow, Dir. Ted Demme, Prod. New Line Cinema, USA, 2001.

Bonnie and Clyde, Dir. Arthur Penn, Prod. Warner Brothers/Seven Arts, USA, 1967.

Boyz n the Hood, Dir. John Singleton, Prod. Columbia Pictures, USA, 1991.

Bugsy, Dir. Barry Levinson, Prod. TriStar Pictures, USA, 1990.

Carlito's Way, Dir. Brian De Palma, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 1993.

Casino, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 1995.

Clockers, Dir. Spike Lee, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 1995.

Donnie Brasco, Dir. Mike Newell, Prod. Mandalay Entertainment, USA, 1997.

French Connection, Dir. William Friedkin, Prod. D'Antoni Productions, USA, 1971.

Gangs of New York, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Miramax Films, USA, 2002.

Goodfellas, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA, 1990.

Harold & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo Bay, Dir. Jon Hurwitz and Hayden Schlossberg, Prod. Kingsgate Films, USA, 2008.

Harold & Kumar Go to White Castle, Dir. Danny Leiner, Prod. New Line Cinema, USA, 2004.

How High, Dir. Jesse Dylan, Prod. Jersey Films, USA, 2001.

How to Make Money Selling Drugs, Dir. Matthew Cooke, Prod. Bert Marcus Productions, USA, 2012.

Killing Them Softly, Dir. Andrew Dominik, Prod. Plan B Entertainment, USA, 2012.

Knocked Up, Dir. Judd Apatow, Prod. Universal Picture, USA, 2007.

Lawless, Dir. John Hillcoat, Prod. Weinstein Company, USA, 2012.

Little Caesar, Dir. Mervyn LeRoy, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA 1931.

Mean Streets, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA, 1973.

Miller's Crossing, Dir. Joel Coen, Prod. Circle Films, USA, 1990.

Mobsters, Dir. Michael Karbelnikoff, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 1991.

Narc, Dir. Joe Carnahan, Prod. Paramount Pictures, USA, 2002.

Narco Cultura, Dir. Shaul Schwarz, Prod. Ocean Size Pictures, 2013.

No Country for Old Men, Dir. Ethan Coen and Joel Coen, Prod. Paramount Vantage/Miramax Films, 2007.

Once Upon a Time in America, Dir. Sergio Leone, Prod. The Ladd Company, 1984.

Pineapple Express, Dir. David Gordon Green, Prod. Columbia Pictures, USA, 2008.

Public Enemies, Dir. Michael Mann, Prod. Universal Pictures, 2009.

Reefer Madness, Dir. Louis Gasnier, Prod. George A. Hirliman Productions, 1936.

Requiem for a Dream, Dir. Darren Aronofsky, Prod. Artisan Entertainment, 2000.

Road to Perdition, Dir. Sam Mendes, Prod. Twentieth Century Fox, 2002.

Savages, Dir. Oliver Stone, Prod. Universal Pictures, 2012.

Scarface, Dir. Brian De Palma, Prod. Universal Pictures, 1983.

Scarface, Dir. Howard Hawks, Prod. The Caddo Company, 1932.

Taxi Driver, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Columbia Pictures, USA, 1976.

Ted, Dir. Seth MacFarlane, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 2012.

The Departed, Dir. Martin Scorsese, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA, 2006.

The Doorway to Hell, Dir. Archie Mayo, Prod. Warner Brothers, USA, 1930.

The Godfather, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Prod. Paramount Pictures, USA, 1972.

The Godfather Part II, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Prod. Paramount Pictures, USA, 1974.

The Godfather Part III, Dir. Francis Ford Coppola, Prod. Paramount Pictures, 1990.

The House I Live In, Dir. Eugene Jarecki, Prod. Charlotte Street Films, 2012.

The Man with The Golden Arm, Dir. Otto Preminger, Prod. United Artists, 1955.

The Public Enemy, Dir. William A. Wellman, Prod. Warner Brothers, 1931.

The Roaring Twenties, Dir. Raoul Walsh, Prod. Warner Brothers, 1939.

The Untouchables, Dir. Brian De Palma, Prod. Paramount Pictures, 1987.

The Wackness, Dir. Jonathan Levine, Prod. Occupant Entertainment, USA, 2008.

This is the End, Dir. Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg, Prod. Columbia Pictures, USA, 2013.

Traffic, Dir. Steven Soderbergh, Prod. Universal Pictures, 2000.

Trainspotting, Dir. Danny Boyle, Prod. Channel Four Films, 1996.

Underworld, Dir. Josef von Sternberg, Prod. Paramount Pictures, 1927.

White Heat, Dir. Raoul Walsh, Warner Brothers, 1949.

Your Highness, Dir. David Gordon Green, Prod. Universal Pictures, USA, 2011.